

## The President's Column

# Educating the Public via the Michael Jackson Case

By Thomas D. Lyon, Ph.D., J.D.

**M**any experts in child sexual abuse likely view the Michael Jackson molestation case with disgust. The case is colored by the media circus, the major players' motives for money and publicity, and the sometimes prurient, sometimes morbid fascination the public has with allegations they view as bizarre and improbable.

What to do if the media calls? One can refuse to comment, but then ensure that fools will rush in to fill the news vacuum. Another possibility is to use the case as an opportunity to educate the public about more mundane acts of sexual abuse. Reporters understand that experts often know little about the facts of the particular case - particularly when those facts are still unknown - and are usually happy to print information that not only aids the reader in understanding the current case but uncovers the dynamics of sexual abuse and its investigation and prosecution.

A number of issues of interest to clinicians and researchers are raised by the case. If the allegations are true, does Jackson pose a risk of molestation to his own three children? Social workers and psychologists investigating abuse of teenage girls by their stepfathers or uncles must often assess the risk to the accused molester's biological children, both girls and boys. Do molesters only molest children of a certain gender or a certain age-range?

If the allegations are true, why did the alleged victim deny abuse when originally questioned by investigators in February of 2003? Significantly, the mother was not supportive of the allegations at the time, and the investigation was not triggered by a disclosure of abuse by the child (unlike most substantiated cases of abuse). The press has provided extensive coverage of the family's hopes of cashing in on the allegations, and the alleged victim's father's claims that the mother has coached the child. The extent to which pressures can lead child witnesses to deny abuse has received less attention. Do abused children often deny abuse when first questioned? How susceptible is a 12-year-old to suggestive influences?

The possibility that the child witness will continue to exhibit ambivalence about the allegations is sure to be discussed. How do children feel about putting their abusers in jail? How did the victim react to the abuse when it first occurred?

The 1993 allegations against Jackson (whether true or not) evince the progression of abuse over time and the seductive and manipulative means molesters use in eliciting the cooperation of their victims. Understanding of the dynamics of acquaintance molestation can counter the public's conception of abusers as strangers who abduct and violently molest children. The case will also provide opportunities for experts to comment on the difficulties in proving child sexual abuse. Most cases lack eyewitnesses and physical evidence. Child witnesses face a number of hurdles in appearing in court. These difficulties will become apparent as the case proceeds.

The case is truly exceptional; that is precisely why it is attracting media attention. However, the issues the case raises are important, recurrent issues confronted by child abuse experts everyday, and the publicity it generates may be a vehicle for enlightening the public.

If you are interested in following the case more closely, a good source is the Court TV Webpage, which includes links to court documents: <http://www.courtstv.com/news/jackson/index.html>. The Santa Barbara District Attorney's office also has a webpage with press releases: <http://www.countyofsb.org/da/press.asp>. The Google news search engine provides a good means of obtaining the latest information.

### Section News Awards

We're pleased to announce that the winner of this year's Early Career Research Award is Elissa J. Brown, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the New York University Child Study Center. Dr. Brown has published extensively, including papers on the effects of and treatment for physical abuse, sexual abuse, and childhood trauma. Bette Bottoms chaired the award committee this year, working with myself, Mark Chaffin, and Jeff Haugaard.

### Officers

The winner of our election for a new member-at large is Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, in the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire. Congratulations Kathleen! Kathleen has already been active in working on the Section's input into the Resolution on the maltreatment of children with disabilities. She is currently drafting

guidelines for researchers interested in incorporating disability measures into their maltreatment research. Thanks again to outgoing member-at-large Anthony Mannarino, who did a lot of work for the Section, including updating the internship guide and editing the Best Practices column for this newsletter.

#### Conferences

Thanks to the efforts of Mark Chaffin, the Section will sponsor a full day of programming on forensic interviewing of children at the 12th Annual Colloquium of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, August 4 - 7, 2004 at the Renaissance Hotel in Hollywood, CA.

Sharon Portwood and I are on the steering committee for the ABA/APA Children and the Law Conference, June 3-6, 2004,

at the Hyatt Regency Washington Hotel in Washington D.C. We've participated in several conference calls, and have suggested topics and speakers on a number of issues of interest to child maltreatment practitioners and researchers, including bullying in schools, forensic interviewing, the potentially traumatic effects of system intervention, the effects of witnessing domestic violence on children, the relation between domestic violence and child maltreatment, and adolescent decision-making competency and its relevance for the disposition of criminal cases involving minor defendants. We're recruiting Section members who are interested in helping with the conference, particularly those in the D.C. area. You can contact me at [tlyon@law.usc.edu](mailto:tlyon@law.usc.edu).

## Bush Administration Accused of Stifling Research

**Thomas L. Birch, J.D.**

*National Child Abuse Coalition*

An August 2003 report prepared by the Democratic staff of the House of Representatives Committee on Government Affairs asserts that the Bush administration is manipulating scientific data and distorting or suppressing scientific findings on a range of policy issues in an attempt to control research to serve its ideology and to protect the interests of its political supporters. The report, *Politics and Science in the Bush Administration*, says that "the administration's political interference with science has led to misleading statements by the President, inaccurate responses to Congress, altered web sites, suppressed agency reports, erroneous international communications, and the gagging of scientists."

The report covers twenty-one subject areas and divides the issues into two categories: "issues like abortion, abstinence, and stem cells that have active right-wing constituencies that support the President" or "issues like global warming or workplace safety with significant economic consequences for large corporate supporters of the President."

In July 2003, attacks on researchers reached the floor of the House of Representatives. During congressional consideration of the appropriations bill for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Rep. Pat Toomey (R-PA) proposed an amendment to de-fund five existing research grants which had already passed through the NIH two-tiered peer review

system. The majority of these grants dealt with AIDS, or issues relating to sexuality and gender. The amendment barely failed, by a vote of 212-210.

At a congressional hearing in October, NIH Director Dr. Elias Zerhouni was questioned about these same grants and others, which several lawmakers criticized as a waste of taxpayer money. Following that, Zerhouni was asked by members of Congress to address a list of more than 160 academic studies that involve sexual behavior, HIV transmission, or alcohol and drug use. It has since come to light that credit for the preparation of the list of targeted scientists has been claimed by the Traditional Values Coalition.

Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) has asked HHS to clarify what role it might have played in creating the list for the Traditional Values Coalition because of the level of detail revealed in the listings. Waxman has asked HHS for copies of all correspondence, emails and records of phone calls between HHS officials and the Traditional Values Coalition. Among the grants identified by the Traditional Values Coalition Safe are several which address issues of promoting safe sex and condom usage among abused and neglected youth, teens with psychiatric disorders, teens with severe mental illness, and homeless youth.