

The Met treats too many suspects as guilty until proven innocent

After several controversies involving sexual abuse allegations, the Met has finally stopped believing complainants automatically. It's all too little, too late, writes Jenny Wiltshire

Cressida Dick, the Metropolitan police commissioner, announced this month that her force would drop its policy of automatically believing complainants would end. The change is welcome but does not go far enough to restore faith in the criminal justice system.

Given the legal presumption of innocence and the duty on police to investigate all lines of inquiry, it is difficult to understand how this approach became policy.

Investigating whether a crime has been committed requires an open mind, but the policy of automatically believing the complainant made impartiality unlikely, eroding public trust in the criminal justice system's ability to deal with sexual abuse allegations.

Dick's announcement comes at a time when that trust has all but disappeared. After the collapse of several high-profile rape cases and reports by The Times that some police officers deliberately withheld potentially exculpatory material, investigators and the Crown Prosecution Service are under increased scrutiny. Yet the failures are not new.

In October 2016 the retired High Court Judge Sir Richard Henriques published a review into the way the Metropolitan police investigated allegations of sexual abuse by prominent people.

The review made 25 recommendations, one of which was for investigations to be prioritised over belief, ending the policy of automatically believing the complainant's account of events. The recommendation notes that it is the duty of an officer to investigate the facts "with an open mind from the outset".

At the time of the Henriques review, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, Dick's predecessor at the top of the Met police, apologised to the former Conservative MP Harvey Proctor, who lost his job and home during the force's inquiry into an alleged VIP paedophile ring. Hogan-Howe admitted that not enough had been done to "test the credibility of the complainant".

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Steve Rodhouse also acknowledged that "lessons should be learnt". Despite this, the force failed to adopt the recommendations of the Henriques review.

Eighteen months later, the Met has finally agreed to adopt just one of the report's recommendations: to stop automatically believing complainants. Unfortunately, the move appears little more than paying lip service to the Henriques review.

To begin restoring faith in the criminal justice system, several of the report's recommendations should be implemented. For example, stopping the practice of referring to complainants as "victims" is necessary if suspects are to be treated as innocent until proven guilty.

Giving suspects a legal right to anonymity prior to charge is long overdue. And a protocol for keeping all suspects informed of the progress of the investigation would prevent those accused from being left in limbo for months.

The government needs to carefully study the report's other recommendations if it is to fix the system, in which many suspects are treated as guilty before they even see the inside of a police station.

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