

No one seems prepared to accept responsibility for a little girl's death



By MICHELLE CAZZULINO

Blakeley Ward can't be accused of being a bad father. There's nothing sinister about him and if you don't believe him, see for yourself. Come inside his Hawks Nest home, where the apricot-coloured curtains are drawn in the living room and scores of videos have been stacked neatly on several rows of black wooden bookshelves.

Don't be put off by his heavily tattooed arms or thinning mass of tangled blond hair; Ward mightn't look like classic father material but he and wife Sharon claim they are big believers in family life.

"Look at this place; new furniture, new toys, pool table, new beds. It was all for the kids," he says. "How could anyone say we are bad parents?"

The reason, you reply, should be fairly self-evident. Shellay, your seven-year-old daughter, just starved to death.

Your behaviour could be described, at best, as bizarre; at worst, confusing, distressing, even sickening. Confronted with the fact your autistic child weighed a miserable 9kg when she died, allegedly having been kept in squalor, your response was to blame a government department for not intervening.

If you and your wife weren't coping, you ask, why didn't you open your door sooner? Ward says: "No one wanted to help. DOCS never came around... they never helped us. All they want to do is lie."

Frustrated and sceptical, you turn to Community Services Minister Kevin Greene. Only today, he isn't talking either. After confirming the Wards were known to the department, he has accepted the advice of lawyers who have warned him against commenting while a police investigation continues.

But this is the second fatality in less than a month that involves a child known to DOCS. And, in a separate case, a 14-month-old boy known to the department is in a NSW hospital, fighting for his life. You want some answers.

According to the Foster Care Association of NSW, 10,623 children and young people were in care in the year ending June 2006 and a NSW Ombudsman's report, released just weeks ago, found more than 100 children known to DOCS had died in the same 12 months.

"It raises the question of whether we are strong enough in our interventions when children are seriously at risk," says Dr Chris Goddard of the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse at Monash University.

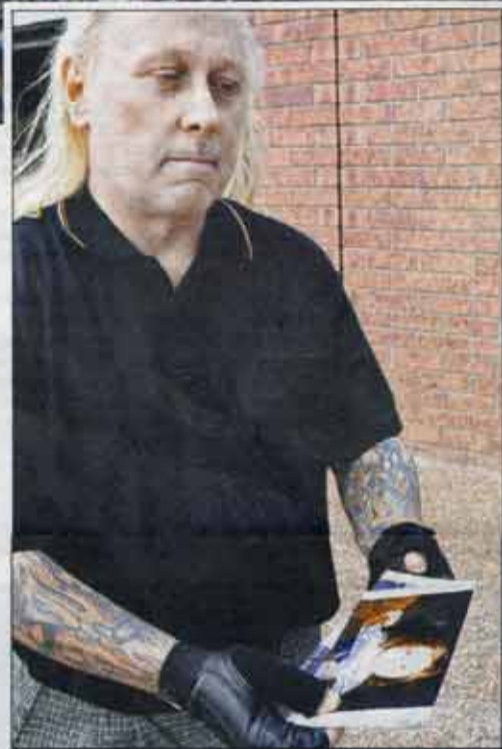
"You only have to look at the notification rates... the questions that would be worth asking in this case [are] exactly how many notifications there were, and how many repeat notifications there were because that's a clear message that the public and other professionals were having to report more than once and were not getting the reaction they would've hoped for."

Like Goddard, Dr Joe Tucci of the Australian Childhood Foundation is himself a former child-protection worker and knows all the difficulties they face daily. He says it's not always a simple matter of knocking on the door when a family comes to the department's notice.

"Parents can be very clever at avoiding DOCS and evading them. They'll change names, they'll move states, they'll enrol their children in other schools, or not at all. There's a lot of things parents do to try to evade DOCS' monitoring role."

"In the UK, they've developed a massive database that different people can look into to see whether concerns have ever been expressed about a child... that's the sort of thing we're going to have to look at creating in Australia."

Marie Fox from the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect says reports Shellay was rarely seen



Portrait of a tragedy... a smiling Shellay Ward in 2005; (inset, left) Blakeley Ward with a photo of his daughter; and (below) the bedroom in the Matraville house where Shellay once lived



Could we have saved Shellay?

around the neighbourhood prior to her death are deeply disturbing.

"Where a child who is emaciated or malnourished is seen, people can intervene, but if the child is not seen, who is going to help?" Fox says. "We should never resign ourselves to the situation where a seven-year-old has to die. As a society we should be ashamed."

"What we need to do is step back and say what could a whole range of people have done; teachers or neighbours or local doctors who may have been accountable for sharing information."

Dr Louise Newman, the director of the NSW Institute of Psychiatry, also believes that support services for families in crisis need to be much more closely linked.

"These people don't just need DOCS," she says. "In many cases they need home-visiting programs, family support and parenting programs. Many of these families also

have drug, alcohol and mental-health issues, so it's a very complex network of services that they need."

"This child should not have been missed in this way. No one, essentially, observed her closely enough, that's all we can say about it."

But in many cases, DOCS' intervention comes after the damage has been done. The president of the Foster Care Association of NSW, Mary Jane Beach, says carers are sometimes forced to take custody of children straight from hospital, where their charges have been admitted for malnourishment and dehydration — and released with feeding tubes in their stomachs. But the problems don't end there.

Beach says: "Carers often don't feel supported by the department and they don't always get the full information about the child. Certainly with health and background and whether the child has been abused or not and how many place-

ments they've had and if they've made allegations in previous placements; all that information should be readily available to the carer."

"If they're trustworthy enough to have the child, then they're trustworthy enough to have the information. It's all a bit of a power play."

Politics aside, Angela Conway of the Australian Family Association believes a broader approach is needed to address the breakdown of relationships generally.

While the Ward family were, by their own reckoning, in desperate need of help prior to Shellay's death, Conway argues that we need to look more closely at what is causing other families to fracture. She says: "This situation is so extreme that it is what DOCS' business should be; to intervene in cases like this. But the system is stretched so thin because we encourage the dysfunction to develop everywhere and then we expect DOCS to pick up the pieces."

But Association of Children's Welfare Agencies CEO Andrew McCallum says when families in extreme crisis continually slip under the radar it's not acceptable to blame DOCS alone. He warns: "We must stop seeing the child protection system as an entry point for other services. This is, I think, where we expect too much from them."

"People have to be realistic... where is the community generally in terms of its willingness to support vulnerable families?"

Back at the Wards' home in Hawks Nest, the children are gone. Three daughters, aged 5, 13, and 15, are now living with friends or family members. Their mother, Sharon, who threatened to kill herself during the week, is believed to have received psychiatric treatment in hospital. Blakeley Ward is still maintaining his innocence, and the date of Shellay's funeral is yet to be announced.

It's no wonder you find yourself shaking your head in disbelief.