

As concern grows over children unjustly taken into care, Cassar

The day they too

Even 17 years on, nurse Alison Stevens cannot forget the horror of going to visit her three-year-old son, Scott, in hospital one evening. She and her husband, Andy, an electrician, arrived to see the boy, who had broken his leg the morning before, only to be told that he had been taken away. A 21-year-old social worker, who had never met the family, had obtained a "place of safety order" and Scott had been taken into care.

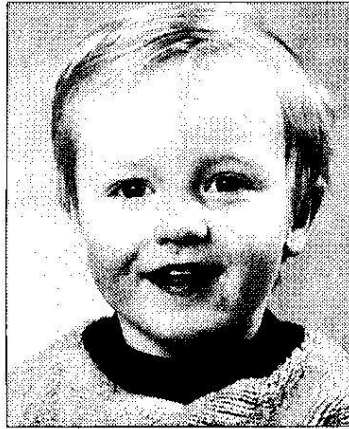
"I was absolutely devastated," says Alison. "I had no idea where he was or who he was with for a whole week."

Three agonising months followed, during which they could see Scott only at a foster home. Every time his parents left, he screamed. They feared that their elder child, Lee, might be taken into care, too, and adopted against their will. One morning, the police came to arrest Andy, even though there was no evidence against him. "Has he ever been alone with Scott?" Alison was asked, in what she took to be an attempt to sow doubts in her mind.

As the cases of two mothers whose children were taken into care were being scrutinised at the Court of Appeal this week, the horror of those days came flooding back for Alison. Judges yesterday dismissed an appeal from a mother who was seeking to get her child back. In a second application, involving another family, they have reserved their ruling.

These are just the latest in a large number of challenges to convictions and care orders in Britain. Following the discrediting earlier this year of "Meadow's Law" – the theory of paediatrician Prof Roy Meadow that one cot death is a tragedy, two in the same family is suspicious, and three is murder, unless proved otherwise – Harriet Harman, the Solicitor General, has ordered a review of 258 cases in which people have been imprisoned for causing the death of their child. Margaret Hodge, the minister for children, has asked for a review of cases of children taken into care where the medical evidence came from a single source, or where there was medical disagreement.

The Stevenses' brush with the care system came about because, a year before his second visit to hospital with a broken leg, Scott had suffered a similar injury. On the first occasion, he landed badly after jumping off the edge of the bath; on the second, he hurt himself getting out of bed. On both occasions, a radiologist



Scott: brittle bones led to injuries



Alison: 'We felt totally alone'

'Some children are being abused by a system set up to protect them'

based on her experience as a nurse, that Scott would have had bruises if he had been manhandled, were ignored. Nor did Alison or Andy's good reputations – despite many testimonials – seem to count for much. "The only evidence social services took seriously," says Alison, "was the radiographer's. We felt totally alone."

Had she not leapt into action and contacted Parents Against Injustice (Pain), she believes she might have lost both of her children to care and then adoption. But, through that organisation, she found a solicitor who specialised in child protection cases and secured a second medical opinion.

The latter concluded that Scott's shortness of stature and

of those parents whose children have been taken away from them by social services departments acting upon evidence that might not be as conclusive as it first appears.

Alison and Andy Stevens's ordeal was relatively brief. After three months, Leicestershire social services said they would not proceed further. Five-year-old Lee was not taken into care and Scott was returned to his family. Nevertheless, that short period of "devastating" panic has haunted Alison for 17 years and determined the way in which she spends much of her spare time.

She believes she was fortunate in that she didn't lose her job, but she could not believe that, even though Scott was given an official diagnosis of brittle bone disease, the spectre of wrongdoing continued to hang over her. Long afterwards, she found that her children still remained on the Child Protection Register. When she saw her own medical notes, she found they contained a letter from her GP saying there was no evidence of Scott suffering from brittle bones. And when her elder boy, Lee, saw an educational psychologist about dyslexia, there were references to the episode in his notes, too.

Scott, now 20, is still living at home near Leicester and working as a forklift truck driver. While his mother talks, he is upstairs, bickering with Lee, now a chef, about who has taken whose clothes from their shared room. When he comes downstairs, he says that he has very few memories of the traumatic three months in which he was taken from the family.

"I can just remember some faces," he says.

But Alison, who has a habit of biting her lip, comes across as a nervous woman. "I used to be well – until this happened," she says, "but ever since, I have suffered from Crohn's disease, which I think is related to nerves."

Despite her illness, she decided as soon as Scott was allowed home that she would set up a local branch of Pain so that she could give advice to other parents going through similar ordeals.

"I don't know what happens to other parents after cases like these," she says. "Most of them we never hear of again. I think they just go and hide, they feel so beaten. But I felt the least I could do was try to help others."

While working as a nurse in a stroke ward, she has advised more than 100 families faced