

Marietta Higgs

If Mori were to carry out a poll of the most hated woman in the country, Marietta Higgs might well come near the top. Hatred is not too strong a word for the emotions Dr Higgs arouses. 'That woman should be jailed for what she's done,' spat a middle-aged father last week. 'She's evil.'

Such feelings stem in the first instance from the widespread belief that Dr Higgs' diagnosis of sexual abuse in 121 Cleveland children, corroborated by her colleague Geoffrey Wyatt, was wrong. To suggest that 67 out of 84 children examined by the paediatricians in one month were victims of sexual interference, went completely against people's gut feelings. It implied that everyone knew someone who abused children. Nobody, however, wanted to believe that could be right.

Most people could identify with the parents, who said they were wrongly accused of abuse and few have ever been in the paediatrician's position, examining the swollen bottom and inflamed anus of a sexually-abused child. As a result, there began a public search for evidence to prove the case against doctors Higgs and Wyatt.

Every child sent home by a judge was another notch on the chart. Every doctor who questioned their judgment was a victory. Important differences between the perspective of the paediatricians and that of the police surgeons who contradicted them, were ignored. Supportive evidence from other child specialists was rubbished. Dr Wyatt, a married man with three children, who has spent much time in South Africa, was soon cast as a weak figure, led astray by his colleague. The public and the press had found a new villain.

The case of Marietta Donata Higgs, born in West Germany, brought up in Australia, has been trawled for information which might paint

her as a woman we can all despise: a lefty, lesbian man-hater, in the Greenham Common image. None of this is true.

Dr Higgs is a married mother of five children, aged between five and 17, two of whom she brought up while completing her medical training in Adelaide. Her husband David, a zoologist, does not go out to work, a fact which has drawn snide swipes from her critics.

While she is instantly recognisable from daily pictures of her walking into Middlesbrough Town Hall for the inquiry, with her business-like step and shy smile, Dr Higgs' family have so far been spared the cameras. As yet, no-one has found a chink in her domestic set-up through which to attack.

So critics have turned instead to her appearance. Dr Higgs was recast as the wicked witch. In the first of two venomous pieces, Anthea Hall described her in *The Sunday Telegraph* as 'the antithesis of the flowing, mother-earth figure. She is small, thin as a bird, the one woman in court with no vestige of make-up, an austere figure who wears no wedding ring. Full-face photographs show her fine lines but not her beaky nose and small receding chin.'

The appearance of her colleague, Ms Sue Richardson, the social worker who has been cast as a co-conspirator in the plot, was also used to build up a case against Dr Higgs as a 'proper' woman. Dr Higgs might not be a feminist, but her 'friend' was, 'with hennaed hair, dramatic eye make-up and "Sue" on her briefcase', as Ms Hall described her.

The one man who has become more central to the saga than Dr Wyatt is the Cleveland police surgeon, Dr Alistair Irvine. Older than Dr Higgs and unimpressed by her methods, he was clearly infuriated by what was happening.

Dr Irvine seems to have resented Dr Higgs' profession-



Marietta Higgs: Going to court

al superiority and the power which devolved from her position. He thought her a stubborn woman, who would not accept she was wrong. Over the months he may well have grown to hate her.

One of his colleagues, Inspector Colin Makepeace, had his own theory for Dr Higgs' behaviour: she saw sexual abuse as her route to fame. The doctor wanted 'the recognition of being the person who had brought this to the attention of the world,' Inspector Makepeace told the inquiry.

The suggestion is both preposterous and unfounded. Trying to make a name for yourself as a doctor in sexual abuse is about as easy as becoming famous in geriatrics. Not only are they unfashionable disciplines, but they raise uncomfortable questions about how we treat children and the elderly. If she wanted fame, Dr Higgs would have done much better to stay working with tiny babies in the neo-natal unit at

Newcastle. Both her subject and the place she chose to practise it - Middlesbrough - mitigated against such a purpose. Nor has the doctor sought another route to fame, through the pages of *The Lancet* or the *British Medical Journal*.

All the doctors who have worked with her in the past have described Dr Higgs as both committed and competent. 'She was one of the best junior doctors I ever had,' said Maurice Little, a consultant paediatrician at All Saints Hospital, Chatham, Kent.

Dr Higgs' evidence to the Cleveland inquiry has been controlled and consistent throughout. She has explained that the children in her care had signs 'consistent with sexual abuse.' If any of those children, now back at home, should in future suffer serious abuse at the hands of a relative, who will write the story vindicating her actions? •

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