

Written evidence from Karen Southon (ACU0047)

Summary

I was adopted at birth in 1962 and in my opinion, the adoption process between 1949 and 1976 was poorly regulated and open to abuse. My adoption has had a lasting impact on my life.

Handed over to my adoptive parents with no medical records or history of any hereditary conditions, shows a complete disregard of my human rights. In addition, adopted people have an incomplete public record of their life and death; in my unusual case I do not have a Christian name on my birth record. According to Article 7 of the UNCRC, everyone is entitled to a Christian name at birth, adopted or not, and it is deeply upsetting for me to have been denied this. I would like to take this opportunity to demonstrate the systemic flaws in the process of searching for adopted people – a process which no Government authority seems to fully understand.

Introduction

As an adopted person, I welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Human Rights Inquiry 'The Right to Family Life'. Whilst not anti-adoption, I feel it is imperative that I highlight the grave wrongdoings of a system that greatly failed a generation of adopted people. Whilst I have covered issues that relate to my own experience as an adopted person, I have also covered aspects of adoption that continue to affect all adopted people, during our lifetime and beyond.

I was adopted at birth in 1962. Both my adoptive parents and biological parents are deceased. I am extremely keen for my evidence to be considered and I accept it may be necessary to redact some elements. I am very happy to provide further evidence if required.

The historic adoption process between 1949 and 1976

The historic adoption process between 1949 and 1976, which guaranteed anonymity for the birth mothers was poorly regulated and open to abuse. I was born on 23rd March 1962 and was handed over for adoption on the day of my birth. My birth certificate shows that I was not given a Christian name. It also lists my father as deceased at the time of my birth – my mother and father were married.

After a birth, there is only one opportunity to give a Christian name to the Register of Births in England and Wales. My mother's failure to give me a Christian name has resulted in my name being recorded as *Female* on the Birth Index Register.

Soon after embarking on the search to find my birth mother in 2006, I was alarmed to discover that the man named on my birth certificate as my father was alive at the time of my birth. Information in

my adoption file revealed how my birth mother's failure to produce a death certificate for her husband, led to her appearance at Ilford County Court in October 1962, seven months after my birth. Under oath, whilst confirming her husband was not deceased, she declared that I was illegitimate but claimed to have no knowledge of the whereabouts of my biological father. From my own Ancestry.com DNA test, I now know that her husband, named on my birth certificate was indeed my biological father.

I have found no documentation to demonstrate that my biological father gave his consent for me to be adopted.

Whilst I am aware that at the time of these historic adoptions, birth mothers were given assurances of their anonymity, the careless actions of Ilford County Court and the social services, failed to respect my anonymity from my birth mother. Incorrectly referring to me as Karen Lesley Coleman, an amalgamation of my registered birth name, COLEMAN, (Female), and the name given to me by my adopted family, Karen Lesley Gay. I greatly resent that my birth mother, who chose not to register me with a Christian name, was made aware of part of my new identity.

My adoption file held at Wandsworth County Court is sparse and unprofessional. It contains a report by someone I can only assume was a social worker, is not on headed paper and is not dated. This careless approach epitomises the authority's approach to these historic adoptions. The anonymity given to the unmarried birth mothers, and carelessness from the authorities ensured that little consideration was given to any documented information and as a result, allowed my birth mother to instigate a series of lies and deceit.

Although I was placed in the care of my adoptive parents at 14 days old, they were both keen for me to understand how difficult their life was at that time. My birth mother's dishonest actions caused an eight-month delay in formalising my adoption. Unfortunately, for my adoptive parents, the authorities refrained from providing any explanation for the delay. As a result, my adoptive parents were left to surmise that my birth mother was undecided in her decision to give me up for adoption, leading to a great deal of distress for my them. Even though this could not have been further from the truth, at no time were my adoptive parents given any reassurance by the authorities that I would not be taken from them and returned to my birth mother. With paperwork pending, my adoptive mother was not even permitted to give her consent for my eight-week infant inoculations. Instead, my adoptive mother was required to wait for my birth mother to grant her approval.

In an effort to withstand any attempt to return me to my birth mother, my adoptive mother went above and beyond to bond with me as quickly as possible. Constantly cradled in her arms during those first months, reluctant to place me in my cot, believing that if she were suddenly required to hand me back, then my distress at being parted from her would have been immediately evident. Sadly, my adoptive

mother died in 2002, unaware of the circumstances surrounding my adoption. Neither my adoption file, nor my medical records give any information about the first 14 days of my life. I have no knowledge of my health at birth, or whose care I was in.

Systemic flaws in the tracing of adopted people

As an adopted person, making the emotive decision to trace and communicate with birth family is not one made lightly. Yet from my experience to date, the process of contacting people adopted between 1949 and 1976, appears greatly flawed and no longer fit for the times we live in.

As well as tracing my birth mother and her husband (my biological father) in 2006, I have since discovered the existence of an older brother born in 1960, also given up for adoption. Determined to find him, I have been required to use a regulated intermediary. Much to my frustration, the requests to access information from the various Government departments have spanned an inordinate amount of time. Some requests have taken several weeks, whilst retrieving other documents have taken many months. In times when information can be accessed almost immediately, these applications should be made a priority and should only take hours or days. From my experience, I feel as though adopted people have been forgotten by the Government and are treated as non-priority, second class citizens, which adds to our feeling of anonymity. Given that it was considered acceptable to sever us from our birth families, this process should be expedited – we deserve better.

When attempting to trace an adopted person, the regulated search process is tedious, questionable and carries no sense of urgency. I struggle to understand the necessity for the intermediary to access certain information. Namely, the Adoption Contact Register and the need to discover whether a self-imposed veto has been placed in the adoption file. As an adopted person, I have never been notified of these services and speaking to other people adopted between 1949 and 1976, they too are equally unaware of the existence of the adoption contact register, the adoption file, and the ability to add a veto. Given that adopted people are oblivious to these files, the customary request for them serves no real purpose other than extending the already frustrating search process.

Eventually the intermediary will write to the adopted person to request contact; the recipient is under no obligation to reply. Again, from my own experience, I have found that there is no standard approach when seeking initial contact with an adopted person. Employing the services of both a charity and a regulated private organisation, I have experienced conflicting information regarding the content of the initial letter in terms of what can and cannot be disclosed when referring to me, the person wishing to make contact.

The edict of not allowing specific information relating to me during the initial correspondence is questionable. My brother and I are no longer children who need to be protected; a clear and concise communication would enable an adopted person to make a considered judgement. The secrecy surrounding these initial communications does little to encourage a response.

I was made aware that during the initial communication, the law dictates that the intermediary must assume that my brother may be unaware of his adoption. As an adopted person, this notion is inconceivable:

Everyone is required to provide evidence of identity throughout our lives. Growing up in the 1970s, I often was required to present a birth certificate (or equivalent) as identification. Adopted people do not have conventional birth certificates. Instead, we have an *Entry in the Records of the General Register Office* (also known as an adoption certificate). This certificate makes several references to adoption, including naming our adoptive parents as our adopters.

As a child, my brother's adoptive mother would surely have mentioned his adoption when asked about family medical history.

Furthermore, many adopted people have very different physical features and characteristics to their adoptive family.

Although the use of a compulsory intermediary supposedly allows an adopted person to maintain their anonymity if they choose to do so, it is my opinion that, given the ease with which information can be obtained online, the anonymity of any adopted person can no longer be guaranteed as it once was. As well as social media, in more recent times, DNA test kits (available to all adults for a fee), link a person to others sharing their DNA enabling direct contact with one another. DNA databases such as Ancestry.com also state the relationship to each DNA match. If my brother wishes to maintain his anonymity, and not have contact with any biological family, should any adult children he may have choose to take an Ancestry DNA test, they would immediately be identified as my niece or nephew, thereby providing me with a direct link to my brother. DNA testing can take place without the consent of the adopted relative or the use of a regulated intermediary and of course would also invalidate any veto in an adoption file if the adopted person was indeed aware of that facility.

Sadly, I have been unsuccessful in my attempt to contact my adopted brother. Although he initially responded to a letter from Barnardo's, he has failed to communicate further. As a result, Barnardo's have assumed that he is not interested in communicating with me and they have therefore closed my file. Naturally I am extremely disappointed, I feel more effort should be made to explore my brother's apparent reticence. Given that anonymity can no longer be guaranteed, at the very least this should have been explained to him. Perhaps in the same way that the historic birth mothers were no longer allowed their anonymity, in circumstances such as mine, I should be able to approach my biological brother with relative ease. For me, it is difficult to comprehend how complete strangers, e.g., the regulated intermediaries are allowed access to the identity of my birth sibling whilst I am not.

Lack of medical records

At the time of my adoption, hereditary conditions were recognised, well understood and used to inform and determine patient treatment. Handing over babies for adoption anonymously ensured we had no knowledge of any family medical history or prevalent medical conditions.

As a child, I can recall the countless times it was necessary for my adoptive mother, to reiterate to our GP that I was adopted each time any ailment arose that could have been linked to a hereditary condition. A note of my adoption should have been prominent in my medical file, this insensitive approach to my medical care was a constant reminder of my differences and anonymity. My medical file also failed to indicate that as an adopted person I have no blood ties to my adoptive parents.

When I first became pregnant, during my first ante-natal visit, the midwife attempted to compile family medical history to highlight any genetic information relevant to my unborn child. I was unable to provide any family medical history relating to me, giving me feelings of worthlessness and humiliation. The blank pages next to my husband's fully completed pages once again, was a stark reminder of my anonymity. My feelings were no less traumatic during my subsequent two pregnancies.

What was once an issue for the adopted individual only, suddenly then affects any children they might have, as they too lack substantial medical history. If an adopted person is in need of any genetic medical intervention e.g. a transplant, we have no option of family donors. Adopted people therefore do not have all the options available to non-adopted people.

It is evident that little consideration was given to the long-term interest of the adopted infant; a decision that may well have served as a short-term answer to a considerable social problem, was in my opinion, at best ill-conceived, at worst, negligent.

Unknown ethnicity

Due to the anonymity surrounding historic adoptions, many people adopted between 1949 and 1976 are unaware of their true ethnicity. In my case, I am legally white British, however, having taken an ethnicity test at my own expense, I discovered that I am 100% biologically white Irish. There is no record of my Irish heritage.

In recent times a requirement to state ethnicity on many official forms has arisen, including NHS documentation. This can be an impossible question for adopted people to answer. To complete any official paperwork, adopted people are therefore faced with three options:

State their legal ethnicity, which may be unhelpful in a medical questionnaire;

Undertake an expensive, time consuming, and potentially traumatic search for birth family / heritage;
or

Take a DNA test (e.g. Ancestry.com) at their own expense.

These options would also apply to children of adopted people.

With no guidance from the Government to declare my legal or biological ethnicity, adopted people may be encouraged to leave the ethnicity box blank. However, few would understand how empty boxes, void of information, is the epitome of an adopted person's life.

Marrying a biological sibling

There are no measures in place to alert or prevent an adopted person from marrying a sibling.

My older brother was also given up for adoption. I have found that our adoption orders were issued in the County Courts local to the homes of our respective adoptive families. In our case just over six miles apart (mine in Wandsworth, London; his Brentford, Middlesex), meaning that we were raised in relatively close proximity to one another. Our paths could have crossed easily. Many adopted people may be unaware of how many biological siblings they have, or where they are living.

The same can be said for my own children, and those of my brother. Whilst it is not illegal to marry first cousins, it is not advisable. The laws in place to safeguard his anonymity are unable to safeguard him from marrying his biological sister.

Discovering the reason for our adoption

Unless an adopted person chooses to go in search of their biological origins, the anonymity surrounding historic adoptions deprives us of any knowledge of the reason for our adoption. Given the timing of our adoptions, and the absence of any supporting documentation – not even the age of the birth mother – many can only assume that the mother was likely to have been young and unmarried.

Although adopted people may be successful in finding their birth family, our only hope of knowing the true reason for our apparent rejection would not only be to find our birth mother, but to also find her receptive. Understanding the true reason for our adoption first-hand is incredibly important to many adopted people.

For some adopted people, discovering how their birth mother had been forced to give them up but had thought about them their entire life can provide great solace, irrespective of how loving an adopted family has been.

Sadly, I discovered that my birth mother, despite still being married to my biological father, had no regrets in handing me over for adoption. During our first meeting in 2007, she was even unaware of my date of birth.

Incomplete records of adopted people

At the General Register Office for England and Wales, an adopted person's public birth record remains registered under the birth family name. Although an adoption certificate supersedes a birth

certificate, and legalises our attachment to our adoptive family, there is no public database showing us to be a member of the adoptive family.

There is a recent trend to search for one's family history through websites like Ancestry.com, or myheritage.com. For those using these sites or conventional genealogy, the birth records of adopted people can not be found under our adopted names – future generations would therefore be unlikely to know of adopted peoples' existence. Furthermore, the failure to publicly recognise our adoptive identity also deprives adoptive parents of a public record showing their legally adopted children to be their own.

Unlike most adoption, my birth mother failed to provide a Christian name for me, leaving me registered as COLEMAN, (Female). When I questioned my birth mother about my lack of Christian name, she claimed that she preferred to leave that responsibility to my adoptive parents. After a birth, however, there is only one opportunity to give a Christian name to the Register of Births in England and Wales. Any subsequent naming undertaken by adoptive parents, appears only as an entry in the Adopted Children Register – a document not publicly accessible.

I understand that Registrars have the authority to reject inappropriate Christian names, therefore I believe that the same principle should apply when a baby is left without a name. There should have been measures in place for the Registrar to allocate a name for me themselves (e.g. Adam & Eve, Janet & John etc.), rather than allowing my birth mother to leave me nameless on the public register of Births in England and Wales.

At the time of my birth registration, the Registrar had no documentation from my birth mother to prove that I was to be adopted, and later given a name. UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child) Article 7 states that all children have the right to a name, which they should be granted at birth. This was not the case for me.

Adopted people are expected to take on the new identity of our adoptive family, yet the public records contradict this entirely, and fails to publicly record our new identity. In the case of my older brother, the adoption process prevents me from finding his identity. My brother and I have never met, and I do not know his name, yet the public birth records show us to be siblings.

Conclusion

As a person adopted between 1949 and 1976, I strongly feel that my human rights, were not respected and as a result, have had lasting consequences on my life. I have discussed a number of issues that have affected me throughout my life as an adopted person, many of which still affect the lives of other people adopted during this time.

Despite the historic adoption process not considering my human rights, I have failed on numerous occasions to find anybody answerable to decisions made on my behalf at the time of my adoption. These include:

My local MP: to review the laws associated with the tracing of adopted people.

OFSTED: as the regulator for the intermediary search agencies, they were unable to justify the laws associated with the tracing of adopted people.

The Department for Education: who are responsible for the policies surrounding adoption. After numerous attempts, they were unable to provide a meaningful response. They could only direct me to the Government website and state the adoption laws as they stand. They failed to provide any explanation.

The General Register Office: to reconsider the way in which adopted people's births are recorded. I was met with a dismissive response.

I feel as though adopted people have been forgotten by the Government and are treated as non-priority, second class citizens, which adds to our feeling of anonymity. It is clear that our human rights were not considered at the time of our adoption, which makes it even more frustrating that adopted people do not appear to be high priority when seeking access to information that we are entitled to.

Those adopted between 1949 and 1976 have received no recognition of the impact of their adoption. Irrespective of the change to adoption law in 1976, I have felt the lasting implications of my adoption. As part of the Government Inquiry, this evidence will raise awareness of numerous issues associated with historic adoptions between 1949 and 1976.

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