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South Essex: Rape! Bogus calls spark real fears

False rape allegations often lead to a great deal of heartache for all involved. JAMES TAYLOR looks at whether bogus claims deter genuine victims from seeking help

Police launched a full-scale rape inquiry last Saturday after a young woman claimed she had been attacked behind shops in Southend town centre.

Understandably, news of the attack sent shockwaves around the community and parents everywhere thanked their lucky stars it wasn't their daughter who was subjected to the horrific assault.

A description of the attacker was published in newspapers and broadcast on radio and television but all was not as it seemed.

On Monday a 26-year-old man reported to Enfield police station in north London in response to the appeals. He was arrested, questioned and then bailed by officers in Southend.

Just over 48 hours after police had launched their manhunt, the 20-year-old woman withdrew her allegation and admitted the rape never actually took place.

The investigation, involving several officers, was abandoned. But police said they would take no action against the woman because of her emotional state.

The issues surrounding any rape allegation are complex and must be treated with the utmost sensitivity.

But if a complainant admits she lied - and it is rare - it raises important questions, not least whether it deters genuine victims from coming forward in the future.

Last summer a teenager from Pitsea told police she had been raped as she walked home in the early hours of the morning - less than a month later she admitted she had lied.

The incidents only serve to highlight the importance of a comprehensive review of all legislation relating to sexual offences which has just been completed by the Home Office.

The aim of the review - which will go out to public consultation this summer - is to modernise what is effectively a patchwork of laws implemented over many years.

It also aims to create more support for victims and offer encouragement to women to come forward in the first place. Research carried out nationally claims that most victims of rape do not report their attacks.

A spokeswoman for national charity Victim Support said it was difficult to say whether the false allegations cases in Southend and Pitsea compounded that.

She said: "Cases like this are very rare which is why they receive so much publicity. Whether it would deter genuine victims from coming forward is difficult to say because we know that there are many different reasons why women do not come forward.

"But the important issue here is that all agencies, like the police, have improved massively in recent years in the way they treat rape victims and those who make allegations.

"Whether something like this puts changes back is hard to say but all agencies have come a long way in their treatment of rape victims."

Volunteers at South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre, a charity based in Grays, said in many cases women did not feel they had enough support.

One of the volunteers, Barbara said: "While I can't comment on specific cases, there are many reasons why allegations may be

withdrawn. But it is important to focus not on the minority who do that but on the massive majority who don't even go to the police."

Southend's CID chief Det Chief Insp Al Hurley emphasised that police treat every single allegation of rape seriously. He said: "No-one has anything to fear from coming to the police. In all cases it takes a lot of officers and resources but rape is a serious allegation and that is why we devote a great deal of time to all cases."

He added: "With regard to the Southend case, I can say no more than the fact we are relieved for everyone that we do not have a rapist in the area."

"Crime scene" - where the Pitsea "rape" took place last summer

Picture: ANDY PALMER

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