

# Dredging the Past: Recovered Memory Or False Memory?

*July 25, 1994*

**By James H. Andrews**

FOR Danny Smith and his family, life may never be the same. While the Maryland family of six is working hard at reconciliation, can they ever forget that in 1991 Mr. Smith's daughter Donna, then 17, accused her father of raping her hundreds of times as a girl, and that as a result of her claims he was tried for one of the most heinous crimes imaginable?

Last year prosecutors dropped the charges against Smith after a jury deadlocked 11 to 1 in favor of acquittal. But the horrifying memories will remain.

And they are real memories - in contrast, it appears, to the memories of sexual abuse that Donna Smith, with the help of a psychotherapist, "recovered" three years ago. After the trial, Donna recanted her claims after concluding that the therapy-induced memories were false.

Gary Ramona's wife and children left him after his 23-year-old daughter, Holly, accused him of sexually abusing her years ago. Her recall of nightmarish events occurred as she was being treated by two psychotherapists for an eating disorder.

In a groundbreaking legal decision this spring, a California court awarded Mr. Ramona - who denies the allegations - nearly \$500,000 in a malpractice suit against the therapists. It's the first time a court has ruled that such therapists owe a "duty of care" to a nonpatient in undertaking "recovered memory" treatment. Even so, Holly Ramona has not recanted her accusations and is seeking redress in court.

Controversy over recovered memory (as it applies to child abuse) is convulsing the mental-health community. A few experts question the authenticity of virtually all "repressed" memories of abuse that emerge during therapy when there was no previous indication of abuse nor corroborating evidence. A larger number of experts accept that memories of traumatic childhood events can be repressed and later recovered, but they question the techniques used by many therapists.

A growing number of mental-health experts contend that too often, false memories of childhood abuse are implanted by ill-trained or misguided therapists. According to Dr. Michael Yapko, a clinical psychologist near San Diego and author of the recent book "Suggestions of Abuse: True and False Memories of Childhood Sexual Trauma," too many therapists rely on abuse-victim "profiles" lacking any scientific foundation, and they

commence treatment viewing childhood sexual abuse as the only conceivable explanation for a patient's distress.

False memories of childhood abuse obviously can have a devastating effect on patients and their families. Since its founding in 1992, the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) in Philadelphia has received some 14,000 complaints from people who say they have been falsely accused of abuse by adults with images dredged up in therapy.

Inevitably, the issue has flooded into the legal system. A year ago the FMSF documented about 800 recovered-memory lawsuits by purported victims of abuse against their alleged abusers, says Anita Lipton, a researcher for the foundation. (Often these suits are brought at the urging of therapists to assist recovery.) And like Danny Smith, some accused abusers are being prosecuted on recovered-memory evidence.

Meanwhile, an increasing number of "recantors" - former mental-health patients who now repudiate their recovered memories -

are bringing malpractice suits against their therapists. In the wake of the Ramona case in California, moreover, more third-party suits against therapists can be expected.

Lawrence James, a Denver lawyer and former psychologist who represents patients in false-memory malpractice suits, says he talks to "victims" of improper mental-health treatment "every other day. The cases are growing rapidly."

"This renegade therapy run amok is the most serious problem the mental-health profession has ever created," Mr. James says.

<https://www.csmonitor.com/1994/0725/25132.html>