

Case 4 Issue 36 – Missing people		LEARNING THE LESSONS
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Supervision of search and risk assessment

Search for a teenage girl, raising issues about:

- *Critically analysing sources of information when assessing risk*
- *Making sure decisions are reviewed by appropriately ranked officers*
- *Not making assumptions about the information available*

This case is relevant to the following areas:

Call handling		Mental health	
Public protection			

Overview of incident

Mr A contacted police at approximately 2am to report his daughter, Miss A, missing. He explained he had last seen her at 6.45pm the previous day and was concerned because she recently attempted suicide, had a history of self-harm, and had gone missing three times in the last two weeks from the mental health unit she had been resident in. The unit discharged her two days previously. Mr A said she had not taken any belongings with her, and on one of the previous occasions she had been found in a specific local area. He confirmed to the call handler it was a “definite possibility” she could harm herself. Mr A also made clear Miss A had denied him access to her medical records, so he could not provide details about her mental health. This was recorded on the log.

The call handler graded the incident as a priority, requiring a response within one hour. Control room staff checked local hospitals with no result and circulated Miss A as missing on the police national computer (PNC). An initial risk assessment of ‘medium’ was made by the duty inspector, Inspector B, although this was before all of the details above were obtained from the father. Within the hour, the duty sergeant, PS A, conducted a further review and assessed the risk as ‘medium’, pending further enquiries.

College of Policing – Authorised Professional Practice (APP) – risk assessment table

No apparent risk (absent) - There is no apparent risk of harm to either the subject or the public.

Low-risk - The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as possible but minimal.

Medium-risk - The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as likely but not serious.

High-risk - The risk of serious harm to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely.

Find out more online:

<https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/#the-risk-assessment-table>

Part of the sergeant's rationale for this initial assessment was the woman had been 'released' from the mental health unit. He had taken this to mean she had been well enough to leave. However, the IOPC investigation found she was released because she had broken the terms of her stay by returning to the unit intoxicated. This was not known to her father, who made clear he was not able to give detail about his daughter's mental health.

College of Policing – Authorised Professional Practice (APP) – assessing risk levels and taking action

It is important to adopt an investigative approach to all reports, ensuring that assumptions are not made about the reasons for going missing. The importance and relevance of risk factors will depend on the circumstances of each case and require investigation to determine if there is a cause for concern.

The approach should not be regarded as a mechanical one and police officers should be mindful that the risk assessment is subjective, and that just one factor alone may be considered important enough to prompt an urgent response.

Find out more online:

<https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/risk-assessment/#assessing-risk-levels-and-taking-action>

The incident log showed a second duty inspector, Inspector A, approved the risk assessment shortly after it was first made. PS A stated she did not discuss the matter with him.

PS A listed further actions for the control room staff, including sending officers to Miss A's home address and providing Miss A's description to the CCTV unit. The control room staff assigned two officers, PC A and PC B, to carry out enquiries. PS A set a number of actions for them to carry out. This included a visit to the missing woman's father, a full search of her address, and contacting the mental health unit she had been resident at.

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However, as a result of a busy shift, the case was not allocated to the two officers until 3.16am, an hour and 15 minutes after Mr A had first called. They arrived at the address at 3.45am. Due to this delay, PS A contacted the mental health unit himself. Staff at the unit confirmed Miss A had gone missing four times recently, and on one occasion she was sectioned after attempting suicide. They informed PS A their most recent risk assessment of her concluded her risk level was “serious and potential for completed suicide”. PS A carried out a further risk assessment, but kept the risk at medium pending the completion of enquiries allocated to PC A and PC B.

PC A and PC B spent two hours at Miss A’s address. They searched the property and obtained further details from Mr A. They reported back to PS A that Mr A did not have “significant concerns” about his daughter. Mr A later told the IOPC this was on the basis Miss A had not left a suicide note, whereas she had on one of the previous occasions she went missing.

PS A told the IOPC because, in the words of one of the attending officers, the father was not “unduly worried” about her, he did not consider her a high-risk missing person. The evidence indicated PS A prioritised the level of concern from the woman’s father over that of the mental health professionals. However, in reaching this decision, the sergeant did not take into consideration the woman had denied her father access to her medical records. He would not have been as up-to-date on the risk she currently posed to herself. The information about the father’s access to the medical records was available to PS A on the incident log.

Inspector A did not carry out any further reviews and had no further involvement of any kind following her approval of the initial risk assessment. This was not in line with the force’s policy. This says the on-duty inspector should assess the risk for themselves and make sure appropriate actions are conducted.

College of Policing – Authorised Professional Practice (APP) – review

Risk assessment is a dynamic and ongoing process which requires further assessments to be made as the investigation progresses and new information and evidence comes to light. The passage of time can increase the risk grading and this must not be overlooked.

The assessment of risk should be reviewed and monitored by a supervisory officer as soon as practicable after the report has been taken and then regularly monitored thereafter. It should then be reviewed at every point of handover and discussion, for example, at the beginning and end of each shift or at tactical tasking meetings.

If the case is managed by an individual or an investigation team and there is no handover, the risk level should be reviewed at intervals as determined by the nature of the case. A supervisor should endorse any decision to vary the level of risk.

Find out more online:

<https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/risk-assessment/#review>

Shortly after PC A and PC B updated PS A about their visit and he reviewed the risk as ‘medium’, a member of the public contacted police to report they had found a woman who appeared to have taken her own life. This was later identified as Miss A. She was discovered in an area she had been found on one of the previous times she had been missing.

Type of investigation

IOPC independent investigation

Findings and recommendations

Local recommendations

Finding 1

1. Inspector A retired while the investigation was ongoing. The force's Professional Standards Department (PSD) was not informed, and nor were the IOPC.

Local recommendation 1

2. The force should develop and implement the following process: when a notification or request for retirement or resignation of a person serving with the police is received by human resources (HR), they should liaise with the force's PSD to find out if the person serving with the police is under investigation by the force or the IOPC. Timely decisions about the appropriate course of action should be made before the resignation or retirement is accepted by HR.

Response to the recommendations

Local recommendations

Local recommendation 1

1. The force told all HR managers a notification must be sent to the PSD when an officer submits a request to retire or resign. This allows checks to be made to find out if the officer is subject of any investigation. Additionally, the force's checklist for officers wishing to retire or resign has been updated to reflect the requirement to notify the PSD.

Outcomes for officers and staff

PS A

1. The sergeant was found to have carried out appropriate actions and risk assessments in the initial phase of the investigation, and had also completed some actions expected of the duty inspector. The force agreed management action was appropriate to address the areas highlighted by this investigation, particularly in respect of mental health awareness in risk assessments (in light of the information provided by the mental health unit). The sergeant went to a PSD staff awareness session dealing with people with mental health issues. This reminded him of his obligations when recording risk assessments (including how information from mental health professionals should be considered) and reinforcing

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the Standards of Professional Behaviour, Code of Ethics and the force's missing persons' policy.

Inspector A

2. The Inspector who did not properly review the incident was found to have a case to answer for misconduct. This was for failing to carry out her responsibilities as hub commander. It was recommended she attend a misconduct meeting. However, she retired from the force before this decision was made, so no further action could be taken.

Questions to consider

Questions for policy makers and managers

1. What steps have you taken to make sure there is a contingency plan if a shift becomes so busy that supervising officers are unable to effectively perform their duties, in line with policy?
2. What training do you have to make sure officers and staff are aware of the key areas of risk in relation to mental health, and to make sure they understand how to apply sufficient weight to the assessments of medical professionals?
3. What safeguards do you have to make sure the relevant parties are informed when an officer or staff member under investigation chooses to resign or retire?

Questions for police officers and police staff

4. How do you make sure you appropriately weigh the evidence available to you when making risk assessments, such as the opinion of a family member versus that of a medical professional?
5. What do you do to reduce the risk of making assumptions, or to check your understanding about the information available to you when assessing risk?
6. Would you routinely consider previous incidents when thinking about how to respond?