

Case 3 Issue 40 – Abuse of Position for Sexual Purpose		
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Officer involved in an abusive relationship with a vulnerable woman

A long term relationship between an officer and a vulnerable woman he met during the course of his duties, raising issues about:

- *Understanding vulnerability*

This case is relevant to the following areas:

<p>Professional standards</p> 	<p>Public protection</p> 
<p>Mental health</p> 	

Overview of incident

PC A (a male officer) visited Ms B’s address following reports a man had thrown an egg at her home address. PC A told the IOPC that someone in his office had said “watch her, she’s a nutter.” She had previously made a complaint against a paramedic, so PC A let the control room know he was going to the address alone.

Ms B said she and PC A “just clicked” when he visited her home. She said she found him attractive and felt he found her attractive too. She said PC A was at her address for a couple of hours and they talked “very intimately”. Ms B said they were not able to complete the statement in one sitting so PC A returned the following day. On this second meeting, Ms B said PC A remarked his back was hurting so Ms B said she massaged his back over his shirt. Ms B said they kissed as PC A left her address.

PC A’s account of how the relationship progressed differed from Ms B’s account. PC A said the next time he met Ms B was some weeks or months later when he bumped into her. During this meeting, PC A said Ms B gave him her phone number and asked him to call her. PC A stated the relationship did not include sexual contact or intercourse until many years later.

Ms B said PC A would visit her address while on duty. She said these visits started the same month as the first time they met. He would visit around two or three times a week. Ms B said during the visits they would regularly have sexual contact, later including sexual intercourse.

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She confirmed the sexual contact took place while PC A was on duty. She knew this because he went to the address while in full uniform.

Ms B moved to live with her daughter some months later. Ms B told the IOPC that PC A visited her the night before she moved and told her he loved her. Ms B said she and PC A continued to have contact over email and Skype after the move.

Ms B's daughter gave a statement to the IOPC confirming she was aware of Ms B's relationship with PC A.

Ms B also told the IOPC that around this time, the officer began to display coercive and controlling behaviours, and act abusively towards her. This included causing pain to Ms B over a sustained period of time. When Ms B told PC A she was in pain, PC A told her she would have to "put up with it".

PC A's version of events differed. He did acknowledge he had visited Ms B twice after she moved. He said that during these visits they watched a film and TV together.

Around three years after PC A and Ms B first met, Ms B moved address again as she had entered into a new relationship with someone. Her contact with PC A stopped. The relationship lasted around nine months before Ms B's mental health became so poor she had to find an alternative place to live.

Ms B got back in touch with PC A when the relationship ended and he visited her several times. PC A's account of this was that "she had a run of repetitions... of her illness... She told me effectively they had said to her the amount of ambulances that were turning up because of her having episodes they, they didn't want her to, to live their anymore."

Ms B described an incident with PC A around this period where she said he behaved aggressively and violently towards her, causing extensive and purposeful pain. For example, by pulling and releasing elastic bands on her body. She also explained how PC A repeatedly hit her with a ruler. PC A did recall using elastic bands with Ms B and claimed they had been used in a planned and consensual manner.

Ms B moved again around three years after her last move. She told the IOPC that PC A had found her a flat and was the financial guarantor. The IOPC confirmed this was accurate with the company that managed Ms B's address.

Around this time Ms B had a major mental health episode and was reported missing. Ms B's sister had informed the police she had learnt of Ms B's location through her partner, who she described as having the same first name as PC A.

Four police officers attended and found Ms B. PC A arrived and made himself known to officers. He said he did not want to give his details. At one point one of the officers present, PC C, asked PC A for his details. PC A gave his first name and said "I don't even know why I'm here. I've been having an affair with her for eight years. Nobody knows, not even my closest friends or colleagues."

Ms B's medical records showed that at various points during the time she was in contact with PC A, she had several medical episodes including drug overdoses and self-harm. The IOPC also obtained three police notes from around four years after PC A and Ms B first came into contact. They showed the police had attended incidents involving Ms B and had acknowledged

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she had mental health issues. Ms B self-harmed on several occasions during her relationship with PC A, culminating in an incident in which she stabbed herself in the stomach approximately ten years after they first met.

The matter was referred to the IOPC following a disclosure from Ms B to the force. PC A was arrested and criminally interviewed, and the matter was referred to the IOPC. During the IOPC investigation, PC A accepted in his interview he was aware of Ms B's mental health issues. PC A explained in his view, this did not mean Ms B was vulnerable on a day-to-day basis and there were long periods where she was not suffering any mental health issues.

During the IOPC investigation, it was found the relationship between PC A and Ms B had already been brought to the attention of the force Professional Standards Department (PSD) some years earlier. The PSD had completed an internal investigation at that time.

PC A gave an account which stated the relationship had begun more recently than eight years ago. He said if he had told PC C and other officers that he had a relationship with Ms B for eight years then that was incorrect, and the correct figure was eight months.

The matter was heard at a misconduct meeting at which the conduct level was not proven. The chair's rationale behind the decision concluded that "given the longevity of the development of the relationship, I am of the opinion that [PC A] has not in any way exploited the mental health vulnerabilities of [Ms B] and equally has not used his position as a police officer to further the relationship". The force misconduct report did not include any account from Ms B.

In reference to the misconduct meeting some years earlier, Ms B told the IOPC that when PC A was being investigated he came round to her one day and "the whole conversation was writing down... when did we first meet... and when did we actually sort of start a relationship...". She also said PC A requested Ms B delete all their communication.

Ms B was asked why there was a need to lie to the PSD investigation. She responded saying "because every time I saw him, from the moment I met him... he was in uniform".

Type of investigation

IOPC independent investigation

Outcomes for officers and staff

PC A

1. PC A was found to have a case for answer for gross misconduct. This was in respect of the allegations he lied during his misconduct proceedings as part of the internal investigation about how his relationship with Ms B began, and that his relationship with Ms B was inappropriate given he was, or should have been, aware of her vulnerabilities. A hearing was held and PC A was dismissed without notice.
2. PC A also served a 17 month prison sentence for misconduct in public office as a result of the IOPC investigation.

Questions to consider

Questions for policy makers and managers

1. What checks and balances does your force have to monitor officer's relationships with members of the public and their activity while on duty?
2. How does your force make it clear to officers and staff what factors constitute vulnerability?
3. How would your force incorporate the account of the woman into an internal investigation? What support measures would you consider?