

*PRESS RELEASE*

(Note to sub-editors: full context of Dr Naish's comments is given in body of text)

**False Memory Happens Often, Psychologist Tells Media**

**Message Must Go Out, 'Loud and Clear'**

The ability to produce false memory is exceedingly common, Dr Peter Naish argued at the launch of *Fractured Families*. He said it was a message which needed to be proclaimed 'loud and clear.'

'If I hear that someone has gone to court charged with something that's come about because someone has recovered a memory, unless there's irrefutable evidence that their story must be correct, then all I can think, on the laws of probability ..... is that this is something false that has just come into their heads - which way do you go?

'Well if you have no other evidence, there's no dispute as to where you go. It was false. And that's what I hope we can get across.'

Dr Naish is chairman of the Scientific and Professional Advisory Board of the British False Memory Society, an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine.

He said that the society's choice of himself as the first speaker showed the society's emphasis on grounding its approach in science.

Pointing out the need to get the message across he said: 'It's such a pity that we only have one gentleman of the press here but I hope he will write it loud and clear.'

*Dr Naish's speech follows in full*

Dr Peter Naish, chairman of BFMS Scientific and Professional Advisory Board pointed out that the society's choice of himself as the first specialist speaker underlined the stress that it put on science.

'They have chosen to put on first the chair of the Scientific Advisory Board and this I think grounds the whole thing in science. What we're talking about isn't some airy fairy idea that, well, people can excuse themselves of things by inventing this rather preposterous story that it is impossible to produce memories, which is what the world believes. And in fact the BFMS, right from its start, wanted to have an independent scientific board and I think that is greatly to their credit, so that they themselves didn't start selecting people to go on it. They triggered the board and then it was self-selecting and completely independent.

'It could tread this very sad path alongside the society but was independent from it, was not paid by it. There is no kind of lip service to it whatsoever. We are independent scientific thinkers who are honoured to be able to offer advice and

ground these claims and explanations in good solid science so that no-one can dismiss it.

‘And to give you a measure of the stature of the people who have been prepared to do this, my predecessor, the first chair of the board, was Professor Larry Weiskrantz, who was the head of the Department of Experimental Psychology in the University of Oxford and a Fellow of the Royal Society and he attracted people of similar stature to join him and form his Board.

‘So what of the science? What is this false memory? Memory, like any of our abilities and faculties is fallible. It has got its limitations. We are not perfect at anything. But with memory we are users of the machine. We experience our own memory and it’s an everyday experience that we forget things. If anyone made the claim that people forget there would be no argument whatsoever. But what is not nearly so obvious because we remember every day, it does not occur to us that some memory somewhere might not actually be accurate. Occasionally we are made aware because someone else somewhere says “no, it wasn’t like that”. We are made aware that a detail wasn’t correct. But we don’t feel, because we produce a memory, it doesn’t feel as if it’s false. You wouldn’t produce it if it were. Why on earth would you invent something that wasn’t true? So we have got a hurdle to jump right away, to convince people that it’s possible to have false memories.

‘Now it has been amply demonstrated that it is and I have colleagues here who will be able to explain that to you very effectively. So, our *gentleman* of the press (a reference to the fact that only one reporter turned up. ed) I can point you, for example, in the direction of two people here who are researching this area here right now and can speak about the very, very latest research in the area.

‘But just a brief, broad brush picture of what’s going on. Our memory contains lots of material that is not associated with a particular event. I don’t imagine many of us here would be capable of writing a best seller but we can all write. I can’t imagine anyone would wish to but we could if we wished write a story about childhood abuse. The material is in our heads. It’s not hard to do and if a misguided therapist gets you to think about such a story which you are completely capable of inventing, then after a while that story is in your head, the same as other stories, the ones that are real memories. It’s as if our autobiography in our heads is like a diary, very incomplete, lots of things in your life you’ve forgotten. Some entries are a bit sketchy but as you flick back through the pages there are stories in there that can then be pieced back together.

And in therapy you grab a few little bits of material and jot down the makings of a story on some earlier page. Afterwards when you flick back through the pages and see that story the writing is in your handwriting. It’s like all the other stories you’ve produced and you think: ‘Oh yes, yes, I remember that, it is a memory, just like any others.’ Only this one is an invented one that you’ve put in there. And this effectively is how our memories function. Once you lay something down, it’s in the same writing. There’s nothing that distinguishes it from the memories that went in the right way and it is remarkably easy to do this. It’s been demonstrated by psychologists running research time and time again. A very large proportion of the public is

vulnerable to such things. Fortunately most of the time we're not doing it and if we do, we're not doing it about anything as terrible as what we're talking about today. But it's very easy.

'Now what about the other side of it, the idea of recovering a memory. The evidence is very, very dodgy that you can repress something so that you don't know about it and then subsequently recover it. But I feel that the debate about that is something that for the time being should be left to the scientists, because what is just indisputable is that if that kind of recovery does happen it must be very, very rare. You can't prove a negative. I can't prove that it's impossible but it must be very very rare. Otherwise it would be impossible for me to stand here talking you today, because I would know that there were lots of excellent examples of people doing that recovering but there are not. So if it happens it's very rare.

'What we know is exceedingly common is the ability to produce false memory. So if I hear that someone has gone to court charged with something that's come about because someone has recovered a memory, unless there's irrefutable evidence that their story must be correct, then all I can think, on the laws of probability – whatever it is, I don't know, let's pretend it's 5% chance that it was recovered, probably less than that but just suppose, and then a 95% chance that this is something false, that has just come into their heads, which way do you go? Well if you have no other evidence there's no dispute as to where you go. It was false. And that's what I hope we can get across.'

Dr Naish ended: 'It's such a pity that we only have one gentleman of the press but I hope he will write it loud and clear.'