

GCE

# LAW: OFFENCES AGAINST THE PERSON

## DIMINISHED RESPONSIBILITY ARTICLE



Offences against the person

## **Mercy for mother who was driven to kill her Down's syndrome son**

By Stewart Payne

The desperate plight of a loving mother who [killed her Down's syndrome son](#) after caring for him for 36 years led a judge to spare her a jail sentence yesterday.

Wendolyn Markcrow, 67, described as having lived a "saintly" life, finally reached her wits' end, a court heard.

During another sleepless night she "snapped" and gave her son Patrick 14 tranquillisers and suffocated him with a plastic bag.

She then slashed her neck and arm with a kitchen knife and sat down in her garden shed where she hoped to die.

She was "overwhelmed with despair" and wanted to end her life. Yet she feared for what would happen to Patrick if she were not there, knowing that her husband could not cope and feeling that the authorities had not given the support she needed.

Oxford Crown Court heard that she had never thought to put her own needs before those of her son and, in the end, "spiralled into depression".

Markcrow, a mother of four, from Long Crendon, Bucks, who admitted manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility at an earlier hearing, survived her suicide attempt.

She told police: "I feel sad, desperate, defeated and ashamed."

Mr Justice Gross sentenced her to two years' prison, suspended for 18 months, and told her: "The pressures you faced were extreme."

He said that, while all human life was sacrosanct, her case had "exceptional factors" and "the merciful and right course" was to suspend her sentence.

"You will be punished as long as you live, in the knowledge of what you have done and what you have lost."

Sasha Wass, defending, said Markcrow, who had pleaded with the authorities for help with caring for her 16th son as his condition deteriorated, lost her mind last March.

"She was exhausted beyond reason," said Miss Wass. "Patrick had spent the entire day listening to the same Elton John CD, shouting the word 'Elton' repeatedly. She was literally at her wits' end.

"She was overwhelmed by feelings of despair and she wanted to die, but all the time there was the worry of what would happen to Patrick."

She said Markcrow was determined he should grow up at the heart of a loving family, despite his condition.

When Patrick was born she was given a book entitled *Your Mongol Baby* and left to get on

with it, Miss Wass said.

"She took the advice and did get on with it. She dedicated the following 36 years of her life to Patrick's care. She did everything possible to look after him at the expense of so much in her own life."

Miss Wass said Markcrow "was not given the degree of assistance she needed and repeatedly asked for", either from the authorities or from her husband, Paul, a local authority architect, who died shortly after her arrest.

Although Patrick attended college as a boy, his condition worsened as he grew older.

Nicholas Browne, prosecuting, said Patrick developed serious autistic problems "which were difficult to treat and counteract".

"He developed a habit of hitting himself persistently in the face. These were not soft blows. He hit himself so hard that a retina in one of his eyes became detached and he had to have an operation."

Patrick had the temper tantrums of a three-year-old at bedtime, refusing to go to sleep and keeping his mother awake night after night.

Despite occasional respite care, Markcrow was "at the end of her tether, emotionally and physically exhausted and subject to long-term depression".

In a letter to social services, Markcrow expressed concern that she had not been allocated a care manager, adding: "I really must have some support very soon."

Miss Wass said Markcrow's surviving children spoke of her in "saintly terms".

Trevor Boyd, the director of adult social care at Buckinghamshire county council, insisted she was offered help.

"It is regrettable that Mrs Markcrow did not accept all the care that was there. This is not a criticism of Mrs Markcrow."

Det Insp John O'Neil, of Thames Valley Police, said there was a duty to investigate the killing. Martin Rackstraw, the Markcrows' solicitor, said: "We are very glad the police and the courts treated it with compassion and sincerity."

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