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EDITORIAL

Artificial intelligence in children's social care: Keeping servants in their place?

Most lawyers know the adage that precedents/templates are 'good servants but bad masters'. It is often easy to tell when a document has been drafted by a young or inexperienced practitioner because unnecessary or inappropriate clauses are retained simply because they are in the template, without any judgment as to whether they are appropriate in this particular case. That earlier wisdom should not be abandoned when we move on to using artificial intelligence (AI).

AI is already being used in children's social care and family justice. It is already too late to say that we don't want it. In April 2025, members of the judiciary were given guidance about the use of AI. Those guidelines were updated within six months of their publication. Such is the pace of developments. Practitioners today *are using* ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini and a host of other tools. Many local authorities are using AI tools to prepare transcriptions of meetings. We have already opened the box. As Pandora found, it is too late now to close it.

Perhaps we should start by acknowledging our own weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Remember the cars driven into rivers, or the wagons stuck in impossibly narrow lanes, because that was where the satnav told the driver to go? As a species, if we are uncertain, we will happily follow anyone (or anything) seeming to give us a clear set of instructions. Demagogues and dictators have, for centuries, taken advantage of this weakness.

AI tools are not without biases and prejudices. They are taught from the currently available information. That information was written and edited by individuals who each have their own biases and prejudices learned from their individual experiences. Generative AI can only regurgitate the information it has learned. It will never produce the leap of imagination required to create great art or invention. AI would never produce the imagery of William Blake or write *Wuthering Heights.* It will eventually find itself in the situation currently besetting French cuisine, which struggles to break out of the straitjacket of *Larousse Gastronomique* to move in new and exciting directions.

For social workers, however, the problem of learned bias is already hardwired into the history of social work. We know that the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century roots of social work lie in assisting 'the poor and unfortunate'. Any AI tool, sent off by its developers to read everything about children's social care, will learn a bias towards looking for problems in areas of deprivation and poverty.

How does this affect social work? Domestic abuse is no respecter of class or income. Notwithstanding this, it is well documented that children's social workers struggle to deal with educated and, apparently, well-to-do parents. Any AI tool will have the same blind spot. A future AI tool, for example, embedded within all the

departments of a local authority and police force, will flag cases where rent arrears are building up, where children are late for school or persistently absent, or where neighbours repeatedly call the police because of late-night disturbances. It has no access to the fact that a mother is buying increasing quantities of Lancôme concealer, or the amount of gin purchased by the parents from Waitrose Direct. On a five-acre estate, no one can hear you scream.

This is not to say that there is no role for AI. Transcription is becoming widespread and has the capacity not only to save time, but also to give parents more confidence that their contribution has been included. Statutory inquiries and serious case reviews have a running theme of different bodies and individuals not having all of the information when making a decision. If the technology could ensure that, for example, information given to the school is automatically copied on to the children's social care file and an alert is sent to the case worker, then many lives might be saved.

What we do know is that AI is good at quickly analysing large amounts of information. Local authority files for children can be huge. It can take several days to read them and to extract and collate the relevant information. Again, this would seem to be a useful role for AI. It might save practitioners a lot of time and without sacrificing completeness, particularly when decisions have to be made under pressure. To use such a system would, however, require training to ensure that social workers can formulate their questions/instructions correctly, remembering that AI has no 'common sense'.

Given the seeming inevitability of AI, social work is probably better served if it can take control of the agenda and set out what tools practitioners actually want and how they should operate. Otherwise, we will be left with the tools that someone with no knowledge of social work thinks will be widely saleable and profitable.

Of course, the title of this editorial presupposes that it is even possible to keep AI assistants 'in their place'. In January of this year, it was announced that Mrinank Sharma, the safeguards research team leader at AI giant Anthropic, had resigned, warning that 'the world is in peril'. Time will tell if he is right.

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