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MSNBC Reports: Innocence lost

Read the transcript to the 9 p.m. ET show

updated 1/18/2005 2:40:43 PM ET

ANNOUNCER: MSNBC REPORTS, “Innocence Lost.” Here is Alex Witt.

ALEX WITT, MSNBC ANCHOR: Hello. I’m Alex Witt. This hour, three stories of innocence lost, allegations and accusations of sexual abuse.

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ANNOUNCER: Next, an experience respected pediatrician and the accusations of betrayal—when MSNBC REPORTS returns.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ANNOUNCER: We now continue with “Innocence Lost.” Here again is Alex Witt.

WITT: He was a trusted pediatrician in a tight-knit community in practice for more than 30 years, known to be devoted to parents, children, grandchildren, caring for some families for generations. Then, troubling accusations began to surface coming from former patients. Was this respected doctor taking advantage of young girls or performing legitimate medical exams that were misinterpreted?

Here is Hoda Kotb.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

HODA KOTB, NBC CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): Gina Limmer (ph) was your typical first-born child, appealing, sweet and most of all obedient, the one her mother could count on to be a good girl. She grew up to be a popular beauty, a dancer and cheerleader, the kind

of girl who always had a handsome date for the prom. Along the way, Gina says she picked up a secret, one no little girl would want to have.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: It was something very, very, very wrong.

KOTB: It was a secret about one of her most trusted caretakers, her pediatrician.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I felt very vulnerable. I felt very intimidated, but I couldn't find the words. I felt frozen.

KOTB: Gina says it all began in 1974, when she was 6 years old and her family moved to the sea seaside town of Merrick, Long island. The family needed a doctor and turned to one of Merrick's most respected pediatricians, Dr. Stuart Copperman. Gina, now 33 years old, says she liked him immediately.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: He made jokes with you. He's very personable and funny.

KOTB (on camera): So he made you feel comfortable?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Right.

KOTB (voice-over): In Merrick, Dr. Copperman was nearly a local legend, known as the rarest of baby doctors, one who made house calls, saved lives and was there for parents in their darkest hours. Affiliated with all the best local hospitals, he was active in charities, his temple and campaigns to keep kids off drugs. And to Gina's mom, there was an added advantage. His practice was just a few blocks away in this comfortable neighborhood home.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I said, well, maybe this is a doctor that I could use.

KOTB (on camera): Someone you could trust, right?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Absolutely.

KOTB (voice-over): When Gina was around 11, she says the doctor approached her mom with an idea that caught her off guard. He said that sometime within the next few years, Gina would be old enough to see him alone, without her mother in the room, so he can talk to her privately about personal teenage issues, like sex and drugs. He also said he'd give Gina a quick routine vaginal exam. Gina's mother thought it and over and agreed reluctantly.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: At first, I thought I'm not real comfortable with this, but maybe I'm old-fashioned. Maybe I'm a prude. Maybe this is the way it should be, because it's a different world today.

KOTB: And so the day came when Gina was 13 and it was time for her yearly checkup. As always, she was happy to go to the doctor. As always, her mother was in the room with

her. And then she says the moment Dr. Copperman had been preparing them for, for nearly two years arrived.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: He does all the regular, you know, yearly checkup things, checking my eyes, checking my throat, checking my ears, and asked my mother to leave the room.

KOTB: Gina's mom trusted Dr. Copperman and did leave the room. And Gina says the doctor did talk to her about teenage issues, but only briefly. And then, it was time for the rest of the exam. Gina says, in the past, he had always quickly checked her genital area. But this time was different. This time, he checked and then said she needed cleaning. Gina says she was shocked when he began rubbing her genitals.

(on camera): Was he wearing latex gloves at the time?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: No, he was not wearing gloves. And there was no nurse in the room. It was just the two of us.

KOTB: What did you think was going on?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I just thought he was cleaning me. I felt uncomfortable to have someone touching me or looking at me so intensely. But I thought that that's what he was supposed to be doing.

KOTB (voice-over): Gina says she left the doctor's office that day feeling mortified and upset.

(on camera): Why not say to him, Gina, in the middle of this, going on for five minutes, why not say to him, cut this out; what are you doing to me; stop?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I trusted him. And I was a kid. But I started to dread the doctor. I started to dread going.

KOTB (voice-over): Gina was so embarrassed about what she says happened that she didn't mention it, even to her mother. The same thing happened at her next two exams with Dr. Copperman, but, still, she didn't tell anyone. Then, one day, in 1983, when Gina was 15, she came home from school and her mother said it was time for her yearly checkup. It would be their last visit to Dr. Copperman.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I said, I can't go to the doctor. And she said, why? And I said, because I have my period. And she said, oh, don't worry. We'll just tell him that he can't check you.

KOTB: Gina's mom said she told Dr. Copperman not to check her daughter's genital area. Once again, Gina says he did the standard above-the-waist checkup with her mom in the room. And, afterwards, once again, Dr. Copperman insisted he see Gina alone.

(on camera): You're her mother standing there. Why don't you just say, this physical is over; you've done it; let's go?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Because I still didn't know what had been going on. I really didn't know. So I believed when he told me he wouldn't be examining her that way that he wouldn't.

KOTB (voice-over): Gina says yet again the doctor started touching her the way he had before. But, this time, the touching lasted nearly 15 minutes.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I felt disgusted. I felt dirty. I felt something was really, really wrong.

KOTB: Outside in the waiting room, Gina's mom wondered what was taking so long.

(on camera): But after five minutes went by and 10 minutes went by, weren't you thinking to yourself, what's going on in there?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Yes, I was, And I didn't like the way my kid looked when she came out.

KOTB (voice-over): Gina, who, remember, was just 15 at the time, says, when she left the room, she was frightened, angry and confused. Once in the car, she finally tried to tell her mother what happened.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I couldn't even find the words. I just looked at her. And I—I said, he checked me. She said, what? And then I said, and he touched me and I feel sore.

KOTB: Gina's mother says she was stunned.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I was really angry. He had betrayed us. He had hurt her. I didn't know what it could mean to her.

KOTB: Gina's mom says she called Dr. Copperman demanding to know what happened and claims he apologized.

The Limmers switched pediatricians and thought that was the end of it. But nearly a year later, Gina was surprised when a classmate told her that she went to Dr. Copperman, too, and the same thing happened to her. When Gina's mom heard that, she said that was it and reported Dr. Copperman to the police.

(on camera): So, when you filed your report, did you think they were going to go directly to Dr. Copperman, cuff him, bring him down to the police station?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: That's what I thought. I was 16.

KOTB: Is that what happened?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: No.

KOTB (voice-over): When questioned by police, Dr. Copperman denied the allegations. And, remember, he was one of Long Island's most respected pediatricians. The guest expert in this baby exercise video.

DR. STUART COPPERMAN, PEDIATRICIAN: BabyCise is a series of carefully-devised and tested exercises.

KOTB: And Dr. Copperman took and passed a privately administered lie-detector test. The police said they had no case.

(on camera): Could you have misunderstood what he was doing? Could this have just been your standard everyday exam?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: No, not at all. In no way is a doctor ever supposed to touch a patient like that.

KOTB: So if Gina and her mom couldn't put Dr. Copperman in jail, they were hoping at least to put him out of business, so they went to the state medical board, that has the power to pull a doctor's license. It would be three years before the medical board even heard the case and Gina's allegations.

(voice-over): In 1987, a medical board made up of two doctors and one priest came out with its decision—quote—"Gina received a standard exam." The board believed the doctor and thought Gina was making it all up. The proceedings were kept secret, and so none of Dr. Copperman's other patients ever knew anything about Gina's case. And Dr. Copperman continued to practice.

(on camera): They didn't believe anything, obviously, that you said.

They sided with the doctor.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Right. When I heard that they were going to let him keep practicing, I remember saying to my mother, he's going to keep doing this.

KOTB (voice-over): Gina had no idea how telling that statement would be.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ANNOUNCER: A respected pediatrician accused of an astonishing breach of trust. We return once again to "Innocence Lost."

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

KOTB (voice-over): In 1995, 12 years after Gina's last visit to Dr. Copperman, a letter arrived at the New York State Department of Health in Albany. In it, a woman in her 30s made an alarming allegation. When she was 14 years old, she wrote, her pediatrician, Dr. Stuart Copperman of Merrick, Long island, molested her sexually. Two years later, another letter arrived making nearly identical charges. By 1999, officials had received complaints from six women, all charging Dr. Copperman with sexual abuse.

Eventually, dozens of women would come forward to say essentially the same thing. They claimed that, when they were young teenagers, Dr. Copperman saw them in an exam room with no nurse, mother or chaperone present and without providing a gown or wearing gloves.

Then they say Dr. Copperman, usually suggesting the girls needed to be cleaned, rubbed their genitals for several minutes. These four women, who say it happened to them, agreed to talk to "Dateline." They have never met each other, but they have remarkably similar stories.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I was about 12 years old. I was walking to the doctor's office by myself, so I was all alone.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I started seeing him when I was 13. It was always just me and Dr. Copperman.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I was 8. I don't remember there being a nurse.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I was 14 or 15 at the time. There was nobody in the room with us.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I didn't have a gown or sheet.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I don't remember wearing a robe.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I know for a fact he was not wearing any gloves.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: No gloves.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: He asked me to remove my panties.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: He said, put up your knees, close your eyes and relax.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: And he had his eyes closed.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: So, it was a clean thing. You have to be clean.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: He started to clean off what he claims was dirt.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: He started rubbing my vagina.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I remember pain, a lot of pain. I said, when is this going to be over? And he said, just little bit longer.

KOTB: For this woman, Deborah Lynch (ph), it went further. She says Dr. Copperman rubbed her for minutes at a time even though she repeatedly said he was hurting her and begged him to stop. She was 15 at the time and not yet sexually active. She says only years later did she realize she had several orgasms that day. She remembers being afraid.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I said to him, I don't understand what is wrong with me. And he said, well, I will explain all that to you once I'm finished. Once he was finished, he patted the inside of my thigh and he told me that all the heavy breathing and all the shaking I was doing was absolutely normal. I didn't need to worry about it.

KOTB: But privately, she did worry about it and she said she was haunted by the shame and anguish. Two of these women say they told their families about the abuse and weren't believed. The other two say they were embarrassed and kept quiet. And Dr. Copperman continued to practice.

(on camera): But is it possible these women were simply impressionable, insecure young girls who misunderstood what the doctor was doing? In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics says that, for some young teenagers, even appropriate touching of the genitals can cause embarrassment and discomfort. And the academy does encourage doctors to spend time alone with teenagers to help them make difficult decisions about sex and drugs.

(voice-over): Stuart Copperman, who had no criminal record and had been cleared of similar charges years earlier, seemed to be just that kind of doctor.

COPPERMAN: Children need rules. Children need limits in order to grow up safe and healthy.

KOTB: He remained a guest on talk shows, was honored as Merrick's person of the year, and his practice continued to thrive. Dr. Copperman categorically denies ever molesting or sexually abusing a patient and says the charges against him are outrageous.

In this letter sent to "Dateline," he declined our request for an interview and said: "The danger in cases like this one is that people hearing unsubstantiated allegations may believe that when a doctor does even a routine inspection of genitals, he is doing something improper. And that will impede the doctor's ability to do his job."

Dr. Copperman's attorney, Joseph Tacopina.

JOE TACOPINA, TRIAL ATTORNEY: I believe in my heart of hearts that he is being wrongly accused of these horrific allegations.

KOTB: Tacopina asks why several of the women who filed a complaint against Dr. Copperman continued to see him for as long as 10 years after the alleged abuse and waited years after that to report him to authorities?

TACOPINA: They believe this happened to them, OK? Why wait 15 years?

KOTB: But psychiatrists, child advocates and even some pediatricians say that, given sexual inexperience and the shame involved in cases like this one, it is typical for a young woman to wait years before filing a complaint.

(on camera): It is predictable, isn't it? This happens all the time.

TACOPINA: Sometimes. I will not accept as a logical response that it's predictable that a 17-year-old girl will have a doctor insert a finger inside her for no medical basis, just for the purpose of sexual gratification, and that 17-year-old girl will not know that that is improper and will not tell anyone, but yet 15 years later will bring it to the forefront.

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(on camera): Well, they are 30-something. They're smarter. They're more confident.

TACOPINA: So, at 25, they were not smart enough? At 30, they were not smart enough? That's an excuse. That's not a reasonable answer.

KOTB: So no fondling?

TACOPINA: No fondling.

KOTB: No molesting?

TACOPINA: Absolutely not.

KOTB: No abuse?

TACOPINA: No abuse.

KOTB (voice-over): Tacopina says he is suspicious that after so many years have passed all of the women came forward at around the same time.

(on camera): How could they possibly benefit from coming forward with these painful and embarrassing stories? What would be their motive?

TACOPINA: Hoda, I don't have the answer to that question. The fact of the matter is, they do it. People do it all the time. False allegations of sexual abuse are—unfortunately lard the criminal justice system.

KOTB (voice-over): To Dr. Copperman and his supporters, there's one other important indicator of his innocence. Remember the lie-detector test he took and passed in 1987, when Gina Limmer filed charges against him?

Well, when allegations resurfaced in the letters women sent to the medical board, Dr. Copperman took a second privately administered lie-detector test and passed again. By now, five years had gone by since the health department began receiving letters complaining about Dr. Copperman.

(on camera): So, what would happen next? In August of 2000, a newly reorganized and supposedly more efficient New York State Medical Board, took up the second case against Dr. Copperman. On one hand, there were women with nearly identical stories, on the other, a respected doctor backed up by not one, but two lie-detector tests.

The two doctors and one health management consultant on the board heard eight days of testimony and, in the end, believed the women. They voted unanimously to pull Dr. Copperman's medical license permanently.

(voice-over): So Dr. Copperman, who had been practicing medicine for 35 years, was out of a job. He spoke with the media briefly after the board announced its decision.

COPPERMAN: I have spent my entire life building a reputation and a name. I care about kids. I love kids. And the fact that these allegations have come up just destroys me.

KOTB: And why had it taken so long for the State Department of Health to act? Dr. Antonia Novello, former U.S. surgeon general, pediatrician, and New York State health commissioner.

(on camera): If my math is right, it took five years, five years from the first complaint that this office received, five years in which he was still practicing, before he were to lose his license. Now, that doesn't really scream efficiency to me.

ANTONIA NOVELLO, FORMER U.S. SURGEON GENERAL: Remember, these are very difficult cases, very difficult cases, he said/she said.

KOTB (voice-over): Difficult for two reasons, no forensic evidence and the women had waited many years to report the alleged abuse. Dr. Novello says she had to be certain she had a rock-solid case the second time around.

NOVELLO: And that's exactly what happened. He is revoked. He is not practicing medicine in the state of New York.

KOTB: Since the newspapers reported that Dr. Copperman lost his license, Health Department sources say more than 50 additional former patients have claimed he molested them, too, including some of the women we spoke with on camera. But for Gina Limmer, it was too little too late. She thinks he should be in jail.

(on camera): Is it enough to have his license taken away?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: No, not at this point. He is already 65. He has had his whole career, basically.

KOTB (voice-over): To Gina and the other women “Dateline” spoke with, there is no getting back the innocence they claim to have lost in Dr. Copperman’s Long Island office. And Gina says she is sorry the medical board didn’t believe her the first time around.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: They gave him 14 more years to practice, 14 more years. God knows how many girls he has touched, how many lives he has hurt.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

WITT: Dr. Copperman denies he has ever done anything wrong. Criminal charges in these cases are not being pursued.

That’s all for this edition of MSNBC REPORTS. I’m Alex Witt. Thanks for joining us.

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