

Let there be light

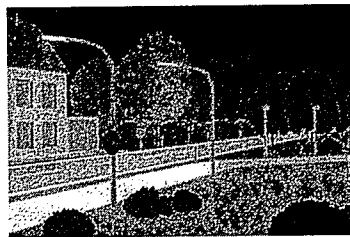
ACCORDING to her Cambridge University CV, senior research associate at the Institute of Criminology Dr Kate Painter is “the leading expert in the evaluation of... public lighting, CCTV and crime reduction”. Since the late 1990s she has built a research, writing and award-winning international lecture circuit career showing how better street lighting can substantially reduce crime.

Most of her work is based on two original studies on estates in Stoke-on-Trent and Dudley: research funded by Urbis Lighting Ltd, “the UK’s largest supplier of street lighting” (annual turnover about £25m). Dr Painter’s current five-year research programme at Cambridge’s Institute of Criminology is also courtesy of an Urbis-funded fellowship.

All of which is fine and dandy except that Dr Painter also happens to be “Mrs Urbis Lighting” – the partner of Patrick Baldrey, the company’s chief executive, director and major shareholder.

Despite Dr Painter’s research, better street lighting’s role in reducing crime is *not* proven. The government has invested huge sums in both CCTV and lighting projects; but a confidential home office report recently leaked to the *Sunday Times* (the Crime Reduction Review ordered by Tony Blair to identify the most effective ways of cutting crime by 2008) is decidedly lukewarm on street lighting. It concludes: “While one home office meta-analysis of local evaluations suggests in some circumstances that street lighting could reduce crime, some studies showed no impact at all.”

Dr Painter’s fingerprints also happen to be on that “one home office meta-analysis”. After completing her first five-year Urbis fellowship in 2000 (she is now on her second), she joined the home office’s research department as “director for CCTV, vehicle crime reduction and intelligence-led traffic policing”. Under her directorship, which lasted just over a year, the review on street lighting and another on CCTV were ordered.



One of the two authors commissioned to carry out the two reviews in 2002 (which never went to tender) was Prof David Farrington, Dr Painter’s senior professor at Cambridge and co-author on some of the Stoke and Dudley studies. Just before she joined the home office, she and Prof Farrington wrote another paper based on the Stoke and Dudley research. It concluded that financial savings from reduced crimes substantially exceeded the costs of better lighting and that street lighting more than paid for itself in less than a year. These impressive figures (quoted on the Urbis website) were mentioned more than once in the home office street lighting review.

In fact accurate crime figures are notoriously hard to find. They can be dramatically skewed by, for example, one prolific burglar committing hundreds of offences. The 2002 home office reviews triggered a row both inside and outside the department, leading to a home office research manager who inherited responsibility for the reviews and shared critics’ concerns about their integrity leaving her job. The issue was whether the statistical analysis applied to the review properly accounted for all the factors that come into play when trying to measure crime rates.

The reviews were examined as part of a cabinet office training programme on research and criticisms voiced there were passed to the home office. A major critic was Dr Paul Marchant, a university statistician, who after submitting detailed concerns to the home office said he was assured that the research would carry “a serious health warning”. In fact an addendum was added which said that after taking his and another experts’ statistical advice, a new analysis had been carried out. But the findings were the same. “The effect on crime are still statistically

significant,” was the verdict.

Dr Marchant, who has since published a statistical critique of the work, was staggered: “I don’t know if street lighting reduces crime or it doesn’t. All I am saying is that the review does not show that it does.” (Dr Marchant also has a potential conflict of interest. As a member of The British Astronomical Association, he supports its Campaign for Dark Skies, which campaigns against light pollution. But he pays the association, rather than the other way round.)

All research, good and bad, can be tainted when potential conflicts of interest are not disclosed. While Urbis’s funding is openly acknowledged on Dr Painter’s street lighting research papers, she relies on her Cambridge credentials for magazine articles and her speaking engagements. Urbis describes her as an “independent” researcher on its website.

The *Eye* cannot pinpoint exactly when Dr Painter and Mr Baldrey started discussing street lighting in Uganda – and they aren’t saying. Dr Painter herself challenged the *Eye* to come up with a wedding certificate to prove a home office-sourced suggestion that the pair had married abroad. While initially denying that any kind of relationship was flourishing with Mr Baldrey while she was at the home office, she later helpfully added: “Well, I don’t see how anyone at the home office could have known about it, we were so careful.”

Thus, on her own admission she and Mr Baldrey were an item while she was at the home office and before she took up her second fellowship. The home office declined to answer any questions about the potential conflict. Prof Farrington meanwhile said Dr Painter’s private life was her own and that in any event she had denied “living with” Patrick Baldrey while he, Prof Farrington, was working with her on street lighting and while she was a civil servant. The home office decision to appoint him to do the review was logical as he and his co-author were already engaged in a similar review. “The published papers on street lighting by Kate Painter and myself were written to the highest standards of scientific integrity and were not influenced in any way by any person from the street lighting industry or anywhere else,” he said.