A climate of fear has been created among professionals working with sexually abused children, a former director of the Sexual Abuse Treatment Unit in Dublin has said.

Dr Moira Woods, who was found guilty of professional misconduct by the Medical Council in January last year, says the inquiry into her has increased "fear among professionals of committing themselves to any statement on child abuse - physical, emotional or sexual".

In her first interview since censure, published in today's Irish Medical News, Dr Woods is strongly critical of the council and concerned that extracts from its report appeared, sometimes inaccurately, in the media. The full report was never published. The Medical Council did not respond yesterday evening when asked for comment on her interview.

In 1992, the council's Fitness to Practise Committee began an inquiry into Dr Woods's management of alleged child sex abuse cases, following complaints from five sets of parents. They questioned her fitness to practise at the Sexual Abuse Treatment Unit (SATU) of the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin, in the 1980s.

She faced 55 charges. The committee investigated between October 1999 and December 2000 and found 13 charges to have been proven.

According to a statement issued recently by the Medical Council, the committee found she "failed to gather all the available evidence and/or did not follow the protocols established by SATU and/or failed to review additional information received after preliminary findings had been reached".
Dr Woods points out there were no guidelines when she was appointed first director of the SATU in 1985.

"Our work was influenced by the international guidelines on best practice then in place in those units which were developing a child-centred programme for the detection of this crime in Canada, Australia, Britain and the United States," says Dr Woods. "I served on the steering group set up by the Department of Health to establish the first guidelines in 1987, and helped to train groups according to those guidelines in health boards across the State."

She says two international experts, Dr Howard Baderman and Dr Anthony Baker, told the committee "again and again that there were no 'procedures' at the time". Communication between different professional workers dealing with the problem in different countries "was the way learning evolved", she says.

She also points out she was never alone when handling child sexual abuse cases. "I worked with the health boards, social workers, legal personnel, gardaí and psychologists," she says.

The bulk of the recent Medical Council statement is devoted to a criticism of the conditions under which Dr Woods was obliged to work in the Rotunda.

While "doctors must take responsibility for not meeting the standards set by their peers", it says, "those who plan, fund and oversee medical services have separate responsibilities to the doctors whom they employ".

It also criticises the SATU, saying it "did not have access to in-patient facilities and could not therefore admit children to a hospital setting. This limited the options for the investigation and management of these cases".

Describing this criticism as "deeply ironic", she says the basic problems the council now suggests should be addressed were the very issues the SATU tried "in vain" to address 20 years ago.

Their efforts were "in vain", she says, "because of lack of co-operation from, among others, the medical profession".
While Temple Street and Harcourt Street children's hospitals responded to the problem of child sexual abuse and sent professionals to courses she organised in the Rotunda, a doctor at Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children, Crumlin, told her child sexual abuse did not exist in Ireland.