Munchausen syndrome by proxy in twins

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SUMMARY A family is described in which twin infants had repeated admissions for apparent haemoptysis. It was proved that the mother was simulating these episodes and she eventually injured one of the children with a pin. The mother has subsequently shown some evidence of a Munchausen tendency in herself.

The spectrum of child abuse is ever widening with the recognition of the more obscure types of injury. Meadow (1977) described a child whose symptoms were fabricated by her mother, causing numerous investigations. He called this Munchausen syndrome by proxy. A further family is described in which there were similar occurrences.

Case report

Twins, a boy and a girl, weighing 2.5 kg and 1.9 kg respectively were born at 36 weeks' gestation by spontaneous vertex delivery. There were no immediate problems at birth. The boy was allowed home with his mother after 5 days. The girl was kept in the special care nursery for 3 weeks during which time parental visiting, although encouraged, was infrequent.

Both parents, previously married, were known to the Social Services Department because each had had children who were suspected, but not proved, to have been nonaccidentally injured. These children are now in the custody of the other remarried partners.

During the first 4 months, despite intensive support, there were 5 admissions for relatively minor illnesses. Then, on consecutive evenings, both twins were admitted with a history of having vomited blood. No cause was found for this and they were subsequently discharged. The same evening the girl was readmitted and the boy the next night, again having vomited blood. On this occasion, blood-stained bibs were produced. Aspiration of stomach contents showed no evidence of blood and again no cause was found for the bleeding. The next day, while the mother was feeding the boy in hospital, she reported that he was again bleeding. Blood was present on his clothing and on the mother's nursing gown. Thorough examination

showed no bleeding points on the child. Mother and baby were known to have different blood groups so the clothing was sent for forensic analysis. At this stage it was thought that the mother was probably simulating the bleeding by injuring herself, and this was confirmed at a much later date by the forensic tests. However, the twins were allowed home in the knowledge that the mother had 'an escape route' when under pressure. The next evening both twins were readmitted, again having vomited blood and no cause was found.

A few days later while the mother was momentarily alone with the twins, blood appeared on the girl's chin. A nurse heard the baby crying, immediately examined her, and found a small bleeding point on her lower lip. He also saw a nappy pin that was almost hidden in the mother's hand. The twins were wearing selfadhesive disposable nappies which did not require the use of pins. The mother subsequently admitted injuring her child with the pin, was charged with assault, and found guilty. She consistently denied falsifying any of the previous episodes. The children were then both placed in the care of the local authority.

Discussion

Although it was recognised from before birth that the twins were at risk of child abuse they appeared to thrive and develop normally. The repeated admissions were accepted as a means of helping the family, although during admissions the parents rarely visited, and there was always delay in discharging the twins. In retrospect, we suspect that the mother felt unable to cope with both twins from early in their life, but could not admit this to her cohabitee. She found a means of escape by injuring herself and gaining relief from the children without showing her inadequacy. We think she may have deceived her entire family as several members had been present in the room on occasions when the bleeding had occurred. Why she should eventually injure one of the children is open to speculation, particularly as she had no concept of different blood groups and was therefore unaware that her falsification could be proved.

This case report differs from those previously described in that the sole gain to the mother was of

relief from the children. The mother showed no previous Munchausen tendency, but since the twins have been taken into care she has presented to her doctor with a history of haemoptysis and also with a bleeding lesion on her breast which was extremely slow to heal.

Reference

Meadow, R. (1977). Munchausen syndrome by proxy. The hinterland of child abuse. *Lancet*, 2, 343–345.

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¹ International Steering Committee of Medical Editors. Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals. *Br Med J* 1979; 1: 533–535.

² Lancet. The Vancouver style. Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals. *Lancet* 1979; 1: 429–430.