Munchausen syndrome by proxy

EDITOR,—Your recent series on Munchausen syndrome by proxy was a useful critique; however, we have further points of disagreement with each of the articles.

Morley rightly criticises bad practice,1 but he offers no alternative advice about dealing with those cases of severe child abuse generally classified as Munchausen syndrome by proxy. He seems more inclined to dismiss their existence on the basis of poor history taking. Medicine can err in overdiagnosis, but of more concern to us is the role of doctors in the creation of Munchausen syndrome by proxy. Morley misses this. His position seems to be overly defensive of both parents and doctors.

Fisher and Mitchell argue convincingly for distinguishing 'prototypical' Munchausen syndrome by proxy from other clinical situations incorrectly labelled as Munchausen syndrome by proxy.2 They attempt to clarify classical usage by reference to the categorical model of Libow and Schreier, and the dimensional model of Eminson and Postlethwaite. Both of these models have contributed positively to the debate on this syndrome, but each has significant flaws. For example, Libow and Schreier suggest the 'active inducers' constitute prototypical Munchausen syndrome by proxy; however, this formulation neglects the fact that without the ongoing involvement of the medical profession active illness induction does not result in the full range of prolonged morbidity characteristic of prototypical Munchausen syndrome by proxy.

With regard to the dimensional model, Fisher and Mitchell state 'the same case may present on different parts of the dimension at different times'. This implies that prototypical Munchausen syndrome by proxy may have previously manifested as anxiety about symptoms, then as symptom exaggeration, and finally as symptom induction. We are not aware of any empirical evidence to support this claim. Abuse/damage to the victim can coexist with any degree of parental 'desire to consult', and is not on a qualitative continuum with, say, overanxious parenting. Therefore damage to the child must be considered a separate dimension that determines the need for child protection.

Meadow regards cases of extreme induced illness as child abuse, but claims that they require different management.3 He is aware of no empirical evidence that indicates that the application of standard child abuse management principles hampers the management of Munchausen syndrome by proxy.

Meadow's agreement with DSM IV that the diagnosis of Munchausen syndrome by proxy be applied to a perpetrator whose behaviour is motivated by 'the need to assume the sick role' is open to more criticism. While we respect Meadows unequalled experience, there is no research that demonstrates that such motivation is universal in this condition. Indeed, attempts to assess the motivation of the perpetrator are notoriously unrewarding, and potentially delay diagnosis, further increasing the risk to the victim.

We argue for (1) recognition of the critical role of the medical profession in the aetiology of Munchausen syndrome by proxy, (2) explicit attention to its abusive nature, (3) a standard approach to the management of cases of severe abuse, including Munchausen syndrome by proxy as defined in these articles, to ensure child safety and facilitate optimal treatment, and (4) restriction of the label Munchausen syndrome by proxy to apply to a transaction between doctor, perpetrator and victim, rather than to any one protagonist.4

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Munchausen syndrome by proxy or factitious illness spectrum disorder of childhood

EDITOR,—Professor Roy Meadow's clarification of the clinical criteria for diagnosing Munchausen syndrome by proxy was both refreshing and timely.1 Those of us who have been involved in the clinical management of cases will have come across misconceptions among the legal and social services which have made this management much more difficult. Chief among these is the post-Allitt perception of Munchausen syndrome by proxy as a psychiatric condition of the perpetrator. We often have to remind other professionals that the term is intended to describe a form of child abuse.

Therefore we have some difficulty in accepting Drs Donald and Jureidini's contention that 'The motivation for the perpetrator's behaviour is to assume the sick role by proxy'. We would prefer to use the term to refer to the abuse itself and the significant role it plays in causing the child, rather than the observer's perception of what was going through the mind of the abuser at the time.

Colin Morley's paper gives us a reminder of the dangers of overdiagnosing abuse.2 We do not believe however that significant numbers of diagnoses of Munchausen syndrome by proxy are made on the basis of individual clinical features rather than as episodes.3 We know of no empirical evidence that indicates that the application of standard child abuse management principles hampers the management of Munchausen syndrome by proxy.

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We would agree that the label Munchausen syndrome by proxy should be used as no more than a description of a discovered situation. In clinical practice we have dealt with two cases in which there has been a complex mixture of longstanding parental anxieties about illness, with 'exacerbations' of this anxiety that has appeared to amount to falsification of symptoms (and possibly more intrusive actions) that seem to correlate with periods of stress in the perpetrator's life. We hope to publish these two cases in due course.

We thank Dr Davis and Professor Sibert and Drs Donald and Jureidini for their interest in the recent articles on Munchausen syndrome by proxy.

Clearly, each of the correspondents has extensive experience in the management of these difficult child abuse cases. We would like to address a few points in summary. Both groups comment upon the DSM IV criteria about the motivation of the perpetrator's behaviour assumed to be 'the sick role by proxy'. We are not sure that this is given that in our clinical experience we have met a number of perpetrators who have had a serious personality disorder, depression, and have even been using the child to manipulate people in their lives. We find the assumption that most perpetrators are assuming the sick role by proxy to be premature given the lack of detailed psychological and psychodynamic assessments of perpetrators in the spectrum of Munchausen syndrome by proxy.

We would argue that the label Munchausen syndrome by proxy should be used as no more than a description of a discovered situation. While we believe that the evidence of abuse is beyond reasonable doubt, if paediatricians follow Colon Morley's criteria some children may not be protected from abuse and could even die as a result of the medical profession's failure to recognise the problem. The report of the British working party on imposed upper airway obstruction contains valuable guidance in this respect.

The nail in the coffin for the term Munchausen syndrome by proxy has been the process of the recent legal cases. Just as other medical terms in the past, which have entered into public usage and changed their meaning (such as mongolism, idiocy, cretinism, etc), Munchausen syndrome by proxy has come to mean something else and has lost its value. We believe factitious illness spectrum disorder of childhood would be an appropriate substitute. We should always try and qualify this however by defining exactly what abuse was perpetrated and what the harm was to the child.

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Dr Fisher comments:


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