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# Munchausen's Syndrome

Nymphea Saraf

### ABSTRACT

The paper is a review on Munchausen syndrome. Munchausen syndrome is a psychosomatic disorder where person fakes illness for attention and adoration from family, community, and friends. Person suffering with Munchausen syndrome can injure themselves and even people around them. It is a serious condition which involves careful monitoring of symptoms as it is difficult to predict and treatment often is difficult due to denial. Munchausen syndrome by proxy is a variant of MS which is now categorized as form of child abuse which involves parents or caregiver who abuse the child to fake symptoms for attention or monetary benefits.

### KeyWords

Munchausen, psychosomatic, factitious and faking.

### Abbreviations

MS, Munchausen syndrome, MSBP, Munchausen syndrome by proxy, CBT, cognitive behavioural therapy

## INTRODUCTION

The term Munchausen originated from 18th century Karl Fredrich von Munchhausen who was a German baron and mercenary officer in Russian cavalry. After returning from Russo-Turkish war, he entertained his friends with his stories of exploits and wildly exaggerated stories of travel and adventure.

In 1786, Rudolf Raspe published book on baron's imaginative tales named *The Surprising Adventure of Baron Munchausen*. In 1951, Dr. Richard Asher described a pattern of self abuse, where individuals fabricated stories of illness which led to complex investigations, hospitalizations, and even needless surgeries. Dr. Richard Asher remembered Baron von Munchausen of his imaginative tales and named this condition as Munchausen syndrome.

Munchausen is a factitious psychosomatic disorder, a mental illness in which person makes up an illness or injury. The terms factitious relates to symptoms that are artificially produced, self inflicted conditions, or exacerbation of pre-existing medical disorders.

The diagnostic and statistical manual IV (DMS IV) recognizes 4 types of factitious disorders.

1. Factitious disorder with psychological symptoms in which the person may pretend to have schizophrenia.
2. Factitious disorder with physical symptoms in which person may pretend to have chest pain or abdominal pain. The term Munchausen can be related with this type.
3. Factitious disorder with both psychological and physical symptoms.
4. Unspecified factitious disorders such as Munchausen syndrome by proxy. This involves a parent who uses his or her child to get needless medical attention for the child.

Factitious disorder may be confused with somatoform disorder, in which person is not pretending to be sick but actually believes there is something wrong physically but the symptoms are actually due psychological issue. Hypochondria is an example of somatoform disorder where person fears that a minor physical symptom is sign of serious illness. The symptom may be real or imagined. Factitious disorder also differs from malingering in which person is pretending to be sick for some kind of benefit like food, housing, or money.

### MUNCHAUSEN SYNDROME BY PROXY (MSBP)

There is involvement of parent or their caregiver. It is classified only as a form of child abuse. This involves falsifying illness or producing symptoms in the child to obtain medical treatment.

A child who has been a victim of MSBP can be recognized

1. If he or she has been brought in repeatedly for medical examinations to identify the problem.
2. The person victimizing the child may deliberately change hospital or doctor to avoid detection.
3. Munchausen syndrome by proxy is difficult to diagnose and requires careful review of child's medical history in order for medical authorities to intervene in MSBP cases.

### Causes

Two main theories have been put forward to recognize the causes for Munchausen syndrome

1. A history of emotional trauma: Any experience that has been deeply upsetting has occurred during childhood years.
2. A personality disorder: A mental health condition characterized by abnormal thinking and behaviour.

Childhood trauma: Unresolved issues with parents as a result of parental neglect and abandonment that can cause them to fake illness. Number of reasons support such behaviour

1. A compulsion to punish themselves as they feel unworthy.
2. A need to feel wanted and centre of attention.

3. A need to pass responsibility for their care and well being onto others.

People who have extensive medical procedures or have received prolonged medical attention during childhood years or adolescence tend to develop Munchausen syndrome when they are older as they associate with feelings of being cared for and pretend to be ill to obtain same care.

### **PERSONALITY DISORDERS**

Personality disorders are identified as Munchausen in the following scenario A person with antisocial personality disorder who sees doctors as authority figures and manipulating and deceiving them gives a feeling of power and control and they take pleasure from such situations. A person with cluster B personality disorder who struggles to regulate feelings between positive and negative views of others. The most common type of it is borderline personality disorder. Difficulties in establishing a relationship as they are unstable about their own identity leads to playing sick role which allows them to build an identity with unconditional support and acceptance in this form and admission in hospital achieves a clearly defined place in social network.

Munchausen syndrome is a befuddling mental illness in which patients fake sickness for attention and adoration from community and family. They go to numerous physicians for possible cure. Munchausen syndrome by proxy is a condition where parents may abuse the child to fake illness for money and attention. In modern times, Munchausen has received a new angle to it and this is known as Munchausen by internet when person feigns illness through web forums , post images of themselves looking sick, set up donation system to receive money to pay medical bills whereas in reality they are perfectly fine and need money to spend on other things. These are scan artists.

### **THE RISKS TO BE AWARE**

Individuals with this condition may risk themselves as well as people around them and may even turn into murderers to destroy any evidence from which people may find out the truth. They can purposefully hurt themselves to prove they are sick, break bone or damage organs performing dangerous stunts and women purposefully get pregnant and induce miscarriage to receive sympathy.

#### Typical Munchausen Symptoms

1. Stories in dramatic versions regarding their numerous medical problems.
2. Numerous and frequent hospitalizations.
3. Vague or inconsistent symptoms.
4. Worsening of condition without any reason.
5. An urge to undergo frequent testing or risky operations.
6. Knowledge of medical terminology and diseases.
7. Seeking medical advice from many different doctors or hospitals.
8. Hospitalizations followed by very few visitors.
9. Not allowing health professionals to talk to family or friends
10. Arguing with hospital staff.
11. Frequent requests for prescriptions for pain relievers or other medications.

They may fake symptoms or illness through numerous ways

- **Making up histories**

They may claim to have serious health condition like cancer or HIV and involve family, health care providers, and internet groups to support their medical history.

- **Faking symptoms**

Fake symptoms of seizures, fainting, and abdominal pain or chest pain.

- **Self harm**

Injure to make look like sick. Inject themselves with bacteria, milk, feces, or gasoline. They may even cut or burn themselves. Take medications to mimic diseases like blood thinner, diabetic medications, and chemotherapy medications.

- **Preventing healing**

Interfere with wound healing by reopening cuts.

- **Tampering**

Manipulate with instruments like heating up thermometers, tamper laboratory test like adding blood or other substances to their urine sample that may show negative results.

## **TREATMENT**

1. Treatment of Munchausen syndrome is difficult mainly due to denial by the person. A gentle and non-confrontational approach is suggested to be adopted by health care professionals. The patient has to be suggested that he has multiple health needs and a psychiatric consult would be beneficial.
2. Another approach suggest direct confrontation of the patient as to why they lied about their condition and do they suffer from stress or anxiety.
3. Munchausen is a mental illness but patients often fake physical illness and admit it.
4. If patients to not admit to lying, care to the patient should be minimised as the patient can no longer be trusted and it is against the doctor-patient relationship.
5. In case the patient admits to have a problem, help can be provided to control symptoms of Munchausen though there is no standard treatment in the combination form of CBT and psychoanalysis

- **Psychoanalysis**

Psychotherapy based on theories of Sigmund Freud who suggested that unconscious motives and beliefs during childhood can cause psychological conditions. In psychoanalysis, an attempt is made to resolve these unconscious motives and beliefs.

- **Cognitive behavioural therapy**

A specially trained therapist teaches the patient ways to replace unrealistic beliefs into more realistic ones.

## **CONCLUSION**

People with Munchausen syndrome still in contact with family may benefit with family therapy by discussing how the condition has affected the family and it also helps the family in recognizing when the person is faking an illness to avoid showing them their concern or support.

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