

NWRPA Newsletter March 2023

Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy

Sue Martin MBE

Monday 13 March 2023

Summary by Frank Kelley

Sue Martin's academic background is in social work/psychology and human evolutionary biology, presenting a doctorate in genetics. For 45 years she has worked for health and social services as well as a number of voluntary agencies. Sue now runs a drop in mental health centre in Merseyside two afternoons a week.

This was a very well received seminar on a mental health problem that is not well understood, poorly researched and difficult to comprehend. We were really absorbed in this talk and did not want it to end. Hence we used the post seminar networking space to continue the discussion.

Munchausen's syndrome is now known as *Factitious Disorder*. The WHO ICD 11 (International Classification of Diseases) has the following summary. *Factitious disorders are characterised by intentionally feigning, falsifying, inducing, or aggravating medical, psychological, or behavioural signs and symptoms or injury in oneself or in another person, most commonly a child dependent, associated with identified deception.*

Sue's view is that this state of mind comes from unconscious processes which have a psychotic core and are related to preverbal stages of development and attachment disorders.. This psychotic core can be encapsulated which means the person with Munchausen's can appear to function normally and seem quite sociable and are consciously unaware of the harm they do.

The hidden nature of the disturbance also depends on family, friends and health professionals holding on to a sentimentalised view of femininity and motherhood. Indeed it is very hard to believe that parents can mistreat their children to the point of serious illness and death. People with Munchausen's have literally got away with murder. It is hard to believe that care giving is there to meet the needs of the caregiver rather than the cared for. This perverse compulsion to care can look very much like the real thing.

Most sufferers are women and can appear to care very deeply for their children. This was even more of a hidden problem in the past when Munchausen's would be unknown, or unpublicised, and there were no systematic forms of child safeguarding.

Even with modern understandings of the horrors of child abuse it is not unusual today to hear journalists campaigning against professionals for a fashionable belief in Munchausen's. When Munchausen's related deaths become public, health professionals are vilified for blaming the innocent parents whose children have died.

Very little is known about helpful treatment. Sufferers can consistently manipulate professionals and present their dependents as the ones needing diagnosis and treatment. They consistently refuse to admit they have problems and rarely seek help. It is very hard for others to get beyond the presented image of caring and doing everything for their children.

Not surprisingly they often have complex and disturbed backgrounds and often have parents who also have Munchausen's. Their victims often fully believe they have the illnesses the parent believes they have.

It is not just the attention of the medical world that is sought such as frequent visits to the GP or health visitors and hospital referrals. Sympathy is looked for from family, friends and neighbours. A

modern variant is to seek attention, sympathy, goods and money through online and social media appeals.

Thank you very much to Sue Martin for a deep and illuminating insight into a complex issue. The liveliness of our response was a further tribute to her work.