

Book Review*

Title: HURTING FOR LOVE: MUNCHAUSEN BY PROXY SYNDROME

Authors: Herbert A. Schreier and Judith A. Libow

Publisher: The Guilford Press, 1993 234 p.p. \$26.95

Review: Roxanne Rae, LCSW, BCD

I was quite excited by this publication, as *Hurting for Love* is the first comprehensive look at Munchausen By Proxy Syndrome (MBPS). In this syndrome, parents systematically fabricate illness in their children or purposefully make them ill. Since these parents, usually mothers, present themselves as sincere, conscientious parents of an ill child, their complicity in the illness is difficult to determine. This form of child abuse can lead to unnecessary surgeries and invasive procedures. It has also been known to cause serious physical or psychological damage and death in children.

Initially, MBPS was portrayed as rare in the literature. One of the contributions of Schreier and Libow has been to clarify that it is more prevalent than believed and is a frequently missed diagnosis. This only increases the need for mental health professionals to become more cognizant of the presenting patterns of this syndrome and familiarize ourselves with possible intervention.

This book is divided into three sections with appendices. The authors have filled this volume with case examples which make it interesting and comfortable reading. The first section, "Description of the Problem," includes an extensive definition and epidemiology. The reader is taken through the difficulties that professionals face in discovering and taking action in MBPS cases. The devastating risks of misdiagnosis are also discussed.

The second segment, "Understanding the Dynamics of MBPS," details the psychodynamics of the parents perpetrating this syndrome and the parent-doctor dyad. Also in this section is a chapter on the psychodynamics of older children in MBPS cases. Schreier and Libow discuss the presentation and the issues involved when the child is seven or eight at the *first* incident of serious medical need. They contrast this presentation with that of the infant or younger child. Also, the collusion necessary by the older child and motivating factors driving the child's participation and the syndrome are discussed.

The third section of this book entitled "Managing the Problem," includes a discussion on therapeutic interventions with these parents. The authors admit that little hopeful data on successful treatment is available. However, they offer case examples and present what is currently known. There is a chapter on psychological testing which reviews Adult Munchausen Syndrome and MBPS patients from the literature. Schreier and Libow present their own work in detail concluding in part that "While no single or

simple psychological test profile yet emerges of the ‘classic’ MBPS mother, we do feel an impressive consistency in the patterns on these mothers’ limited store of information (with the exception of medical knowledge), poor abstract conceptual ability, superficial social skills, and outgoing behavior. This is coupled with a rigid denying defensive style masking an underlying rebelliousness, emotional immaturity, self-centeredness, lack of social conformity, and intensive passive resentment” (p. 155). The chapter on legal issues provides helpful information a practitioner needs to have when MBPS requires legal action. They present case examples of legal difficulties and the lack of judicial uniformity which practitioners frequently find frustrating. The chapter on management is a good overview of what to do with MBPS cases. It may also function as a quick reference with its guidelines for identification, verification, confrontation, and long-term management of these cases.

There are also three appendices. The two entitled, “The Genee Jones Case” and “Developmental Protocols for Clinical Warning Signs” are interesting additions but not necessarily useful. However, Appendix A is entitled, “Bibliographic References to MBPS Signs and Symptoms.” This could be an extremely useful tool for the practitioner desiring information on specific medical presentation. The authors have listed the corresponding number from their extensive reference section, so only those articles pertaining to a particular illness presentation can be easily notated.

Having experience with MBPS, I found the second part of this book the most helpful. To their credit, Schreir and Libow offer their psychological theories on a foundation of the greater social context of women in our society and women in relationship to the medical establishment. They also detail the contributions of the physician and medical system to MBPS. They include self-doubt which can lead physicians to proceed with even more invasive procedures, seeking to discover the elusive mystery illness the mother’s child has presented.

The core of the authors’ work is the presentation of the individual psychodynamics of the MBPS mother. They discuss how this syndrome is a perversion of good mothering and at a surface level, how well these mothers appear to function as parents. Common to the history of these women is a “longed-for but absent father.” There is a deep and painful sense of not being recognized. Their early wounding leaves them “forever hungry and doomed to pursue at a distance a bizarrely controlling relationship with a powerful physician” (p.99). The mother’s fantasy relationship with the child’s doctor is the prime point of her MBPS behavior. It is in the service of the forming, maintaining and controlling the relationship with the physician that the mother’s child is objectified and used toward that end. In their description of how an infant functions as the mother’s fetish, the authors state, “not only does the infant serve to keep the relationship alive by holding the physician’s interest, but ‘it’ also serves to keep the mother’s fear of and rage at the powerful/accepting doctor under cover, in ways that could not occur if the mother herself was being cut into and mutilated” (p. 98) as would be the case in Adult Munchausen Syndrome.

Despite the impressions one might get from a T.V. movie and a popular novel about MBPS, there are real gaps in our understanding of this problem. Schreier and Libow offer the results of their extensive efforts to provide a volume which will be helpful to both the novice and the experienced practitioner. *Hurting For Love* is a pioneering work which provides the practitioner ready access to needed information on MBPS.

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