

has spent a major part of his life in hospital, so the psychological closeness of relationship may not be the same as the biological closeness may suggest. Furthermore, underdeveloped cognitive abilities may cause delayed realisation of loss. The mentally handicapped do react adversely to stressful changes, e.g. change of wards or staff. This report of psychiatric illness following a major life event highlights the significance of bereavement and grief work with the mentally handicapped.

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Psychiatric Munchausen's Syndrome: A College Register?

SIR: We wish to report an unusual psychiatric variant of Munchausen's syndrome and to propose the formation of a College Munchausen's register.

Case report: A 23-year-old woman arrived by taxi at the A & E department of a provincial teaching hospital. She was mute, but wrote that she was being pursued by aliens, whom she could see and hear, and who were telling her to kill herself.

It was decided to admit her informally to a psychiatric ward. During the admission procedure she claimed to be of no fixed abode, writing the abbreviation NFA in a defiant fashion. She gave no addresses of family and friends, but provided a list of contacts with people and establishments, for example a battered wives refuge, all of which proved to be fictitious. Immediately after admission she bought chocolates for the ward staff. She also bought soft toys and children's books from the hospital shop and sat playing with them. She then demanded in writing that the police be called because she had been raped prior to admission.

After six days of silence, and following a visit from the police, she began to talk, denying that rape had occurred. She said that she had been in many hospitals, travelling throughout the country using a railcard. She explained that she lived with a much older man who had befriended her on one of her train journeys. He was contacted and finally

arrived to collect her. He confirmed her story, saying that she had been living with him for a year and that she frequently disappeared from his home leaving him to wait for a telephone call from yet another hospital. He listed 25 hospitals at which she had presented. She had been admitted to both medical and psychiatric wards and had at times been detained under section 2 of the Mental Health Act.

The patient then claimed to have been sexually abused in childhood by her father and to have been abandoned by her parents. Her real wish was "to have parents like everyone else". She also claimed to have trained as a psychiatric nurse but to have failed her examinations. Before her history and mental state could be explored further, the patient and her cohobitee packed her belongings and left to catch the train to their home.

We report this case for two reasons. Firstly, we are unaware of any other descriptions of elective mutism as a central feature of the psychiatric variant of Munchausen's syndrome. We think that this case will be of general interest to those of our colleagues who have not seen our patient in person. Secondly, we wish to propose that, since psychiatric Munchausen's syndrome may be increasing in frequency (Jones & Sternberg, 1985), there is a strong indication for establishing a central register of such cases. The Royal College of Psychiatrists is uniquely placed to administer this and could record patient descriptions, aliases, and previous patterns of presentation. In the case described above we suspected a factitious disorder from early in the patient's admission. If a register had been functioning at the College, then instead of many telephone calls, a single one may have sufficed.

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Migraine, Insomnia and Reactive Depression Due to Brain Serotonin Deficiency?

SIR: Within a little over a one-year period, ten female patients (age range 20–40 years) were seen in our outpatient department, complaining of severe migraine, troublesome insomnia, and depressed mood. In six of these subjects, the first symptom to occur was severe migraine, with a frequency of two-three times per week; this was followed several weeks later by troublesome insomnia, and later on by a feeling of