

Innocent victims of a deadly deceit

Simon Wessely sheds light on a bizarre syndrome that can endanger a child's life.

IT SEEMS unlikely that anyone will fully comprehend the reasons that led nurse Beverly Allitt to murder three babies entrusted to her care.

Her crime was terrible, particularly since the vocation of a nurse is to care for the sick. We think of them as angels, not killers. We have always found it hard to believe that people who care and protect children can sometimes harm them so grievously. Society long ignored the physical abuse of children by their parents — until a radiologist drew attention to the battered baby syndrome.

Even then, it was thought to be rare. Later, many thought it impossible that parents could sexually abuse their offspring. However, perhaps the hardest to comprehend is the syndrome known as Munchausen's by Proxy, which may be the nearest thing to a diagnosis in the case of Beverly Allitt.

Munchausen's by Proxy was first described in 1971 by Roy Meadow, a professor of paediatrics in Leeds. Baron Munchausen was a fictional character who told fantastic stories. The term Munchausen's syndrome was already used for adults who attended hospitals with fabri-

cated illnesses. Unlike malingerers, these patients had no obvious reason for deceiving doctors. The often elaborate steps to which people went to fabricate illness fascinated doctors, and the literature is full of examples of the most complex and sustained deceptions.

However, these people only harmed themselves. Meadows drew attention to mothers (it is almost invariably the mother) who deliberately made their children sick in order to gain medical attention. Since then, more cases have been recognised. Children have received various substances — salt to make them sick, sedatives to make them drowsy, laxatives to induce diarrhoea and anti-diabetic tablets to reduce blood sugar.

Others have been repeatedly smothered to cause fits due to lack of oxygen. Children's skins have been damaged with irritants, simulating dermatitis. Less immediately life-threatening is tampering with specimens or charts — adding blood to a urine specimen, for example, or altering a temperature chart.

However, the child may then receive unnecessary, painful and sometimes dangerous

investigations as doctors try to discover the cause. Sometimes the children themselves come to believe the mother's story, start to believe they are sick, and act accordingly.

Even to suspect that a mother is fabricating her child's illness is hard for hospital staff. Doctors and nurses are trained to believe what parents tell them. Everybody believes that the mother is frequently the best judge of the health of her offspring.

Accepting the diagnosis means accepting that a mother, who is outwardly devoted to the child and frequently comes from a paramedical background herself, is deliberately harming the child and lying to the staff.

Professionals now understand the reality of physical abuse. It is not difficult to empathise with the young mother who, sleepless and unable to cope with a persistently crying baby, hits the child just to get relief. Usually the parent will tearfully admit to the abuse, and request help.

But Munchausen's by Proxy is different. Here, the parent sets out to deceive, often in a complex and premeditated fashion. Even when confronted, the mother may still deny the abuse. Not surprisingly, professionals find it hard to believe.

Why do parents behave in such a bizarre way? It is rare for



How Allitt made the headlines.

the mother to have a severe mental illness. Sometimes it is a cry for help, but there are many other ways of drawing attention to one's problems without harming the child.

It is also ineffective because if the cry for help is recognised, the mother often denies any problems and rejects offers of support. Sometimes the mother has a history of abuse, leaving her feeling chronically deprived and cannot accept help. The mother may need the child to be ill so that she can receive warmth and attention without admitting her emotional turmoil.

Sometimes such a person has already joined a caring profession as an expression of these same unmet needs. Fabricated illness may be the result of a

combination of an abused or loveless childhood, abnormal personality and a knowledge of medicine. This may explain some cases but some actions, such as those described in Nottingham Crown Court, are so extreme as to defy rational explanation.

Munchausen's by Proxy is rare. However, it is also very serious. Children subjected to such abuse are at risk of death.

What can be done? Often, the answer is very little. It is possible, albeit difficult and distressing, for professionals to work with parents who physically, and even sexually, abuse their children provided the parents openly acknowledge the abuse, and wish to change.

However, deceit is at the heart of Munchausen's by Proxy. Vehement denial can make it impossible to protect the child, and some need to be removed from the mother for their physical safety. Most will need long-term statutory monitoring and supervision.

Distasteful though it may be, doctors dealing with sick children who have unexplained, mysterious illnesses must always consider the possibility that the child's symptoms are being fabricated by the mother.

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