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FABRICATED OR INDUCED ILLNESS IN CHILDREN: THE ROLE OF FRONT-LINE SOCIAL WORKERS IN RECOGNITION, INTERVENTION AND DECISION-MAKING

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Abstract

Fabricated or Induced Illness (FII) in children, formerly referred to as Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MSbP), occurs when the parent (almost always the mother) deliberately but duplicitously seeks to render the child's medical condition, and increasingly their behavioural presentation as well, to be worse than it actually is in order to meet her own needs. This article looks particularly at the role of the social worker in identifying and assessing this very disturbing form of child maltreatment and discusses the necessity, and challenges, of taking a multi-agency approach if the child is to be protected. There is particular emphasis on the focus of work where FII is a concern being what is happening for the child due to the mother's behaviour, rather than seeking to establish whether she should be considered a perpetrator or not. Attention is given to the characteristics often associated with FII in both the mother and child and what forms the mother's behaviour towards the child might take. There is particular reference to the social work task in working directly with the family, but also interactions with what can be a complex network of professionals. Finally, there is discussion about decision-making in situations where FII is identified and the implications for rehabilitation of the child, or the safety of children born subsequently to child-protection interventions having been made.

Introduction

The possibility of a parent deliberately causing a child to be ill and suffer unnecessarily, not just from the 'illness' but from the effects of painful treatment regimens and anxiety about their health, is one of the most disturbing forms of child maltreatment that social workers may encounter in everyday practice.....

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