The Münchhausen of Munchausen Syndrome

A Historical Perspective

The term Munchausen syndrome has been used colloquially and in the medical literature to describe a patient who travels from hospital to hospital feigning illness, often with dramatic presentation, and risks dangerous diagnostic and surgical procedures to gain hospital admission. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Revised Third Edition (DSM-III-R) renamed and classified the illness as chronic factitious disorder with physical symptoms (301.51). It has been proposed that the term Munchausen syndrome be abandoned since it conveys no idea of the psychodynamics behind the patient's behavior. The term has also been considered flippant in that it may reflect the medical profession's understandable, although not very rational, attempt to get even with these patients. The need exists for collecting a large prospective series of these patients and studying them intensively to more exactly elicit the psychodynamics and study treatment options for Munchausen syndrome.

While much has been written in the medical literature about Munchausen syndrome, little has been written about the person for whom the syndrome is named, Baron Hieronymus Karl Friedrich Freiherr von Münchhausen. However, before proceeding, a word about the spelling of von Münchhausen's name is appropriate. The correct spelling of the Baron's name is Münchhausen (Münch derived from München, i.e., Munich, and hausen derived from Haus, i.e., house). Unfortunately, the spelling that has persisted in books over the years and permeated the medical literature is Munchausen.

Henceforth, the spelling Münchhausen will be used when referring to the illness Munchausen syndrome and Münchhausen will be used when referring to Baron von Münchhausen himself.

Baron Münchhausen was born on May 11, 1720, into an old aristocratic family (an uncle was consul in London, England, and another relative was Minister of Justice in Saxony, Germany) in Germany and was active in public affairs. He fought the Turks in the Russo-Turkish War as a cavalry officer from 1737 to 1739 (Figure 1). After he retired in 1760 to manage his family estate in Bodenwerder (Figure 2), which is near the River Weser and approximately 50 miles south of Hanover and close to Hamelin (of Pied Piper fame).
Münchhausen became locally famed for entertaining his friends and guests with his tales of war and sportsmanship.

The baron was later embarrassed by a 1785 book by an anonymous author entitled Baron Münchhausen’s Narrative of his Marvelous Travels and Campaigns in Russia. Whether or not the baron’s own tales were slightly embellished, this book in effect labeled him as boastful and a braggart. Thereafter, the term Münchhausen was used to refer to a person who was believed to be a “teller of tall tales.” There is, however, no evidence to suggest that the baron’s military career was anything but a distinguished one.

The book, written out of financial need and in English, has been attributed to Rudolf Erich Raspe (1737-1794), a German mineralogist. It is not known for sure whether he was ever a guest at Baron Münchhausen’s house. Raspe, an interesting and dubious character himself, had fled Europe disguised as a Dutchman after being accused of embezzlement, and settled in London. The book was subsequently translated into German by Gottfried August Bürger. Many editions of the book have since appeared in both English and German.

The term Munchausen syndrome was coined by Richard Asher, a British physician who described three patients presenting to a British hospital with dramatic gastrointestinal symptoms in his classic 1951 article in Lancet. Subsequent investigations of the patients revealed no organic illness, although all had undergone multiple previous surgical procedures.

While the following story is of mostly historical interest, it is also worth recounting as a typical example of difficulties that have taken place with Munchausen syndrome nomenclature. Baron von Münchhausen was married twice. His first marriage to Jacobine von Dunton in 1744 was childless but happy, although she died in 1790 when he was aged 70 years. Four years later he married a 17-year-old girl named Bernhardtine von Brunn, who was renowned for her romantic affairs both before and after her marriage to the baron. It was said that Fraulin von Brunn gave birth to a child named Polle during her marriage to the baron, and there was therefore a movement to call Munchausen syndrome by proxy, a condition in which one person fabricates symptoms for another (usually a mother on behalf of her child), Polle syndrome.

Meadow and Lennert recently made an excursion to the estate at Bodenwerder, where Münchhausen lived until his death (Figure 2). After conferring with the curator of the family archives and studying parish birth and death registers, they learned that von Brunn gave birth to only one child, named Maria Wilhelmina, while married to Baron von Münchhausen. Münchhausen took formal steps at the baptism to have the records show that the child was not his, since it was believed that Fraulin Brunn conceived the child from a liaison she had had while allegedly recovering from illness at the nearby Spa of Piermont (now Bad Pyrmont). The child was reported to have died of “seizures” at age 10 months.

The baron instituted divorce proceedings involving alimony, which kept him unhappy until his death on February 27, 1797. Although Fraulin von Brunn was from Polle, an attractive town in lower Saxony on the River Weser near Bodenwerder, and while she had another daughter, Maria, who was born and baptized at Polle, there is no suggestion that she had any children named Polle. It has therefore been recommended that the term Polle syndrome be abandoned. von Brunn later moved to Holland, where she had other children.

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REFERENCES


