



Disordered Mother or Disordered Diagnosis: Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome

David B. Allison, Mark S. Roberts

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Disordered Mother or Disordered Diagnosis? begins with a thorough review of the original literature on Munchausen patients, from which authors David Allison and Mark Roberts demonstrate in detail how, psychiatric descriptions of this alleged condition have been thoroughly circular. The label "Munchausen Syndrome" never denoted a coherent Syndrome: from its "discovery" it has served as a catchphrase for chronically and disagreeably ill patients who share nothing beyond an ability to confuse and eventually antagonize their physicians. With the new MBPS variant, the unity of a "Syndrome" again follows entirely from medical suspicion about a heterogeneous population of disadvantaged mothers and chronically ill children.

Yet, if the diagnosis is an artifact, it is not without serious social implications. Their final chapter reviews the celebrated case of Yvonne Eldridge to show how the application of this specious diagnostic category may lead to the forcible removal of children from the home over the protests of already disempowered mothers. Seeking to regain custody of their children, mothers accused of MBPS face long, uphill legal battles in which they are confronted by "expert witnesses" who rely on a wholly circular and self-justifying literature. This extraordinary situation invites comparison with the grievous institutional follies of other eras, to wit, the accuser's power of attribution in the prosecution of witches in early modern history and the physician's authority to diagnose and treat hysteria in the 19th century.

Passionately written and possessed of rare historical breadth and intellectual clarity, *Disordered Mother or Disordered Diagnosis?* is a powerful wake-up call for the medical, psychiatric, and legal professions. It is essential reading for clinicians and feminist scholars, for social historians, sociologists, and jurists, indeed for all who care about the plight of disadvantaged mothers and the rights of medical patients in our society.

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