



### **E46 An Inter/Multidisciplinary Approach of Münchaussen by Proxy Syndrome: The Role of Public Health Professionals, Courts, and Forensic Experts**

*Maria S. Ciruzzi, PhD\*, Paso 790 Piso 7, Depto A, Ciudad, Buenos Aires 1031, ARGENTINA*

After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to discuss the role of public health professionals, courts, and forensic experts in cases of intrafamilial violence, especially concerning Münchaussen by Proxy Syndrome.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showing how public health professionals can contribute by providing evidence and technical information firsthand in order to prevent crime and protect potential victims.

A case that defies the medical understanding of child abuse and maltreatment, which happened at a National Paediatrics' Hospital in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where inter/multidisciplinary work between public health professionals, courts and forensic experts helped to protect a child's life and her best interest will be presented.

Working with intrafamilial violence is a tough issue because professionals face incomprehensible and unreasonable situations: a victim whose perpetrator is the one who has given him/her life, or who has adopted him/her as his own son/daughter, or just somebody familiar to the child. The perpetrator is the very same person that the law or social convention says is the one responsible for the child's protection. From a psychological point of view, it's easier to admit assault or abuse from a stranger. Almost nobody is prepared to suffer violent behavior from familiar people. This is precisely the trap: how can anyone denounce child abuse or maltreatment when the perpetrator is no stranger to the victim? Would they believe the child hasn't consented? Would grown-ups believe that this is no set-up for the perpetrator? Are health professionals prepared to deal with this disturbing matter?

Medical staff has these same feelings when facing child abuse and maltreatment. At first glance, they usually have doubts about the real violence of the situation, they are afraid of reporting it to the authorities and being wrong, but they are also afraid of remaining silent and putting the child at risk. They fear they will make the situation worse if they report it and they also fear being exposed to liability in any sense.

All these doubts can be overcome if an interdisciplinary team works with this issue: medical doctors can help to provide the right diagnosis, psychiatrists can help understand family relations, social workers can provide alternatives for caring for the child, and lawyers can help decide the best way to protect the child's rights and make relations with courts a little bit easier.

This case is one of the uncommon cases in Argentina's criminal history of a female serial murderer: the probable fake sudden-death syndrome of both of "Jane's" sisters, which could only be determined retrospectively by a differential diagnosis based in medical records, but being almost certain when taking into account all the variables presented in the case. Both of "Jane's" sisters were the same age as "Jane" when they died. They had the same unspecified syndrome which, in "Jane's" case turned out to be phenobarbital poisoning triggered by her mother's criminal conduct. The victims were all women of the same age, "Jane's" mother worked as a medical receptionist and she had a psychopathic personality.

From professional experience, working together on this case helped achieve the best interests of the child, a constitutional principle owed to the Children's Rights Convention. When professionals from different disciplines and institutions focus on the same case with their own view, expertise, and knowledge, they learn from each other and help open and enrich their mental horizons while aiming to give the best of themselves.

At this Argentine pediatric hospital, medical staff is trained in evidence collection and protection. The staff knows this is an important issue which will certainly help them stop the abuse, protect the child, and determine who is to be held responsible.

"Jane" and her brother are living with their grandmother at their home in Tucumán, Argentina.

### **Münchaussen by Proxy Syndrome, Intrafamilial Violence, Health Public Professionals**