

## I11 Child Neglect or Chronic Diseases? An Overlap and a Matter for Experts

Luana Bonaccorso, MD\*, University of Turin, Turin 10126, ITALY; Caterina Bosco, MD\*, Department of Public Health and Pediatrics, Torino 10126, ITALY; Elena Coppo, MD, A.O.U., Turin, ITALY; Sara S. Racalbutto, PsyD, Dipartimento di Pediatria d'Emergenza, A.O.U. Ci, Turin, ITALY; Giuliana Mattioda, MD, Department of Public Health and Pediatrics, Turin 10126, ITALY; Federica Mirri, MD, Department of Public Health and Pediatrics, Turin 10126, ITALY; Francesco Lupariello, MD, University of Torino, Torino 10126, ITALY; Giancarlo Di Vella, MD, PhD, University of Torino, Department of Public Health Sciences, Torino 10126, ITALY

**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand that sometimes caring for a child with chronic health conditions can be perceived as a burden by the parents, leading to a higher risk of physical abuse and neglect.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting the importance for pediatricians to perform accurate investigations in order to assess if nutritional deficits in children can be ascribed to some types of neglect or to a chronic congenital disease.

Child neglect is a rising concern in industrialized countries and, despite being often underreported, it represents the most prevalent form of maltreatment.<sup>1</sup> Welch and Bonner defined two main categories of neglect: deprivation of necessities or caregiver's inability to provide for the child's basic needs (e.g., food, water, shelter, medical care, clothing, and education) and neglect or failure to provide adequate supervision and safety according to the child's developmental age.<sup>2</sup>

In the same countries, the prevalence rates of childhood chronic illnesses that fall under a specific medical discipline such as endocrinology, cardiology, gastroenterology are on the rise. In particular cancer, Diabetes type 1 (DM1), chronic infections, neurological impairment, hypoxemia from congenital heart defects, and gastrointestinal diseases (malabsorption, celiac disease, etc.) are increasing.<sup>3</sup>

In order to contribute to the knowledge of the topic, this study performed a five-year retrospective analysis of suspected neglect cases managed by the multidisciplinary "Bambi" Unit of the Pediatric Hospital "Regina Margherita" of Turin, Italy, dedicated to child abuse, between January 2015 and December 2019. Among the 998 children treated by the Unit in this period, 96 were suspected cases of child neglect. Among them, 27 children were affected by chronic health conditions: 10 young boys and 17 girls; the mean age was 4.9 years. The family status analysis identified the same number of divorced and not divorced parents. Childhood chronic illnesses included: DM1 (nine cases), congenital heart defects (three children), dermatological diseases (four cases), neurological impairment (three children), malabsorption (six cases), and recurrent infections (two children). Almost half of the cases were reported to the Judicial Authorities and social workers intervened because the parents were deemed unable to properly care for them. The most serious case involved a 12-year-old girl, affected by DM1, who died subsequent to hyperglycemic coma. Her mother exhibited severe parent-child interactional difficulties leading to inadequate insulin administration. She also displayed tentative and inconsistent parental behaviors and inefficient coping skills.

This case provides attendees with a better knowledge of some conditions, such as severe metabolic imbalance or nutritional deficits, that may result from either child neglect or chronic congenital diseases.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes both situations overlap, making it hard for health care providers to reach a proper differential diagnosis. Not only a deeper medical investigation, but also a holistic approach, is mandatory to prevent the symptoms from worsening, requiring prompt medical care and social support.

### Reference(s):

1. Monica L. McCoy and Stefanie M Keen. Child Neglect. In *Child Abuse and Neglect*, ed. Taylor & Francis Group (New York: Psychology Press, 2013), 90-122.
2. Biagio Solarino, Michael Tsokos, Giancarlo Di Vella, and Lucia Tattoli. Child Starvation and Neglect. In *Handbook of Famine, Starvation, and Nutrient Deprivation: From Biology to Policy*, ed. V.R. Preedy, V.B. Patel (Gewerbestrasse: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 1-19.
3. Paula K. Jaudes and Linda J. Diamond. Neglect of chronically ill children. *American Journal of Diseases of Children* 140, no.7 (July 1986): 655-658.
4. Paula K. Jaudes and Lucy Mackey-Bilaver. Do chronic conditions increase young children's risk of being maltreated? *Child Abuse and Neglect* 32, no. 7 (July 2008), 671-681. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2007.08.007>.

### Child Neglect, Chronic Diseases, Parental Behavior