

Medical Child Abuse – Clarifying Misconceptions

By Dr. Veena Ramaiah, MD, FAAP

Due to recent media attention, many misconceptions exist about the diagnosis Medical Child Abuse (MCA). MCA was previously referred to as Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP). In the medical community, the accepted definition is that MCA “occurs when a child receives unnecessary, harmful, or potentially harmful medical care at the instigation of a caretaker” ([Medical Child Abuse: Beyond Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, T. Roesler & C. Jenny, 2008](#)). This definition is meant to identify and delineate a significant pattern of over-medicalization of children by their caregivers.

The reason for the evolution of the name change includes focus on the harm to the child rather than defining parental pathology, clearly stating this is a form of abuse not neglect, and reinforcing that the caregiver is the perpetrator and not the medical provider. In MCA, the medical provider is the “instrument” of the abuse. Caregivers who perpetrate MCA exaggerate, fabricate, simulate, or even induce signs and symptoms in order to escalate medical care. The pathology behind this behavior is complex and deep – much more than can be explored here. The corresponding diagnosis for the perpetrator caregiver is Factitious Disorder Imposed on Another (FDIA).

As expected, this is a very difficult diagnosis to make. Many providers lack knowledge of the definition or of the harms. Children who are victims are unable or unwilling to speak out – they may not realize they are victims as the caregiver has convinced them that they are vulnerable, special, or sickly. And understandably there is denial about the diagnosis especially if a provider feels they perpetuated harm. An important point to remember is that the medical care – visits, testing, imaging, procedures – is driven by the caregivers who are reporting (exaggerating or fabricating) or creating (simulating or inducing) symptoms.

In 2021, Netflix released a movie called Take Care of Maya. According to Netflix, “In this documentary, an anguished couple in Florida battles authorities for custody of their ailing daughter after being accused of child abuse.” This is a very tragic case with a heartbreaking outcome. Emotionally, it devastates you as it is meant to do. We should all learn from the tragic outcome in order to improve systems, processes, and medical care. However, this movie should not be used to refute real harms that occur to children. From a medical perspective, it is important to realize that Netflix presents a one-sided, biased, dramatized view of events. The medical information presented in the movie is misleading and oftentimes incorrect. To get a balanced and in-depth view, I highly recommend listening to Season 3 of this podcast: <https://www.nobodyshouldbelieve.com/>.

As pediatricians, there are measures we can take to prevent escalation to MCA or protect children who are victims of MCA. The first step is understanding the [definition of MCA](#). The second step is gaining insight into the [perpetrators of MCA](#). Third, and most important, is incorporating into clinical practice some [strategies for prevention of MCA](#). One of the basic foundations of pediatric care is to be a voice for the voiceless. Thank you for continuing to advocate for children’s safety and well-being.

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