

"Face the Facts", BBC R4 21/07/2001

Lady's voice - The doorbell went about 7 in the evening and in came 2 Social Workers and 1 police officer they said they were going to take Jane away. I was in complete shock, I couldn't believe it was happening.

Man's voice - This week we investigate the plight of innocent families mis-diagnosed with the little known but disturbing medical condition Munchausens Syndrome by Proxy a misdiagnosis which sees mothers and fathers demonised and pronounced unsafe and unfit to be parents. but all too often not based on any sound evidence, and its a situation thats on the increase according to health professionals and charity workers.

Lady - We see roughly one case a month where they're being accused of MSBP or severely neglecting their children. Out of all the cases that we've seen where they have been suspected of having MSBP we've never seen one case where its actually been borne out, not one.

Man - Jane Colby, Chief Advisor to the Charity the Thymes Trust says her concerns are shared by Earl Howell the shadow spokesman on Health in the House of Lords.

Earl Howell - The number of false accusations of MSBP is very great and the trouble is I don't think the extent of the problem is appreciated. Either in government or in the wider world.

Man - The very first diagnosis of Munchausens Syndrome by Proxy or MSBP was made less than 25 years ago and describes a highly uncommon but potentially dangerous pattern of child abuse in which individuals try to get attention by feigning illness in their children as Paediatrician at the University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff Professor Jo Sibert explains.

Prof Sibert - ~The perpetrators of MSBP get gratification from the attention that they and their children get from fabricating these medical symptoms or signs.

Man- and abuse when it is real can range from inventing problems which don't exist to actually harming the child.

Prof Sibert - Children can have unnecessary operations or their life is attention on illness and they can be quite emotionally handicapped because of it and of course there is a significant death rate and recurrence rate particularly in non accidental suffocation and non accidental poisoning, so it is a very serious condition.

Man - But one mother we'll call Madeleine knew nothing of all this when she gave birth to twins in a Midlands town in 1993, 2 and a half months early by Caesarean section. What Madeleine does recall however is that right from his extremely premature birth one of the twins John had problems.

Lady - John had to have his first operation at 10 days old for bilateral hernias. John continued to have problems and have operations for ruptures and hernias right up until he was 31/2.

Man - When he was only 2 weeks old he needed both his groin hernias repaired.

Man - Surgeon Christopher Rance oversaw John's treatment through the first few weeks of the baby's life.

Dr Rance - These operations were all straight forward and were completely necessary. I didn't at any stage think his

symptoms were unusual as I deal constantly with young premature babies with bladder problems.

Man - Slowly John's medical condition improved but his parents remained concerned that there was still something wrong.

Lady - His behaviour could be very bizarre at times, he spent a lot of time lining his cars up in colours and sizes and if you moved one he would throw such a tantrum. I knew he was different from having other older children.

Man - Whereas he could do some things very well indeed he was very good at drawing. but when it came down to reading and writing when he did begin to write it was like a different language. He could tell you what he had written but nobody else could

Man - Eventually Terry and Madeleine asked their local Council for help. 6 months went by and they heard nothing until out of the blue they were summoned to a special meeting - a case conference where it turned out a legion of professionals would pronounce on their son.

Lady - No-one had explained what it was about and to walk in to see 20 people - 15 of these people didn't even know us they went round in a circle asking each Doctor, Social Worker, Psychiatrist and Psychologist their opinion we were literally given about 2 1/2 minutes at the end to try and put our side of the story.

Man - The couple were accused of taking John for treatment he didn't need of seeking operations and tests that weren't necessary. Treating the boy in other words like an invalid, When in the view of the assembled experts there was nothing wrong with him.

Lady - The psychiatrist recommended that the children be taken into care because I would fatally injure the children

It was absolutely terrifying I just sat there in disbelief I couldn't believe that anyone could think so ill of me.

Man - But they did and though Madeleine and Terry were allowed to keep their son at home Social Workers visited every day to check that he was safe. Hundreds of miles away in North London another couple Jan & Michael Blunt had also requested help for their 10 yr old son David. He'd been diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue and had missed much of the previous years schooling. When it eventually came however the official response from the London Borough of Barnet was not what the couple were expecting.

Lady - We'd come back from holiday on the Sunday night and then suddenly from absolutely nowhere on the Tuesday morning we had this letter from a Social Worker saying that he was coming to see us and that this was a ?Child Protection matter. I mean we knew absolutely nothing about this and here we've suddenly people saying that this was a Child Protection matter it didn't make any sense to us.

Man - Before either of these families had been confronted with any allegations of abuse secret meetings had already been held about them and their supposed treatment of their children much discussed. It is at this early and very tentative stage according to Psychologist Lisa Blakemore-Brown that an allegation of MSBP can take increasing hold in the minds of the investigating authorities.

Lady - Once there's a suggestion in the system that MSBP is actually at the root of the child's problem I consider that the combination of the very first rumour that a person may be fabricating a child's problem together with the complex machinery and the secrecy creates a very potent cocktail that then prevents people from reasoning properly about what they're actually looking at.

Lady - We felt that we couldn't absolutely win that people had talked about us behind our back. This is a result of people we didn't even know who saying we didn't even know what. This machine had been set in motion and there was precisely nothing we could do to stop this machine. It was like a fantasy really.

Man - What ever Jan Blunt said or did she felt that the Local Authority was convinced she was guilty of abuse. In documents we have obtained their concerns are evident. They fear David's needs were being exaggerated he was being kept off school unnecessarily and being taken from Doctor to Doctor for unwarranted treatment, all to meet his mothers emotional needs. The phrase MSBP was never used by officials but it all seemed to conform to some sort of pattern.

Lady - Somebody kept talking about a profile but they wouldn't say a profile of what or what this profile contained but it was just that anything we seemed to say or do they said oh it fits the profile.

Man - This was a reference to a psychological profile a sort of template of character traits that could point towards a possible Munchausens parent. Its

use though is controversial and in America psychologists like Dr Eric Mart say its so vague its contradictory.

Man- If you're too ingratiating, too friendly and informed to Doctors that could be a warning sign, on the other hand if you argue with them a lot and demand more tests and feel that you're not getting good enough care for your child thats also a sign. Having a medical background of some type denying that you have it when you're confronted with signs of it, all of these things have been suggested as part of the profile which alert Doctors to the possibility of MSBP.

Man - Those who fit the profile and so come under suspicion say its like being caught up in a medieval trial. If they deny abuse they're considered guilty.

Lady - They-re mentality and opinion was admit what you've done wrong Mum and we can help you and your children won't be taken away but I hadn't done anything wrong it was like a witch hunt.

Man - The assumption was, that whatever we said was a lie and anybody who agreed with us would somehow persuade them to take our side and sort of dazzle them with our own lying.

Man - But one person who did believe Madeleine and her husband Terry was Early Howe.

Man - Some of the things said by Social Services in this case were breathtaking in my view. The fact that prayers were said for the boy was evidence of attention seeking and therefore abuse, when the parents played with the children this was just being done for effect and when they didn't plat with their children this was emotional neglect. This is the kind of way that behaviour is made to look as though it fits the accusation where as of course it does nothing of the kind its cloud cuckoo land.

Man - But in this cloud cuckoo land no-one it seems thought to seek the opinion of the hospital Doctor involved in the case to find out whether in Johns care the investigations and operations they carried out were necessary like Christopher Rance the boys Consultant Paediatric Urologist.

Man - I found it absolutely extraordinary that I had not been contacted about my input to his welfare. I think they should have rung me up at the very beginning to gauge the details but I was never approached.

Lady - The children was told that Mummy & Daddy would take them to school in the morning but they may not be there to pick them up in the evening and they'd be taken into foster care. It was just harrowing just having to listen to the children being told this.

Man - Finally after 2 years the couples Local Council formally announced that it would be seeking an order to take their children into foster care. A week

long Court hearing in January this year was extremely traumatic for Madeleine and Terry but having heard all the evidence the Judge found in their favour.

Lady - Right to the very end Social Services were still saying we abused the children and on the Friday afternoon the Judge walked into Court and his announcement was no findings, no judgements, no orders. I just stood there in disbelief I couldn't believe it was over at long last. We'd been completely vindicated.

Man - Indeed the Judge praised Madeleine and Terrys parenting and has now launched an enquiry of his own into the role of Social Services in their case. Their children were finally removed from the At Risk Register in May. John has now been diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome a form of Autism which accounts for the behavioural problems his parents had been so anxious about for so long and following another case conference Jan Blunts son David was also removed from the At Risk Register. He too has a form of Aspergers Syndrome according to Psychologist Lisa Blakemore-Brown.

Lady - He presents with a cluster of neuro developmental problems which could very easily be recognised many years ago. Instead of which there were pushed to one side instead his mother was blamed and this of course raised anxieties within the family.

Man - This month Jan was told David would receive a Statutory assessment of his Special Educational Needs, its what she and her husband have been seeking for more than 2 years.

Lady - The worst thing was actually watching the effects of it on the children. Our son seemed to internalise some evil view of himself because he thought all this thing was his fault and even to this day he will still on occasions take on board responsibility for something thats absolutely nothing to do with him.

Man - We invited someone from the London Borough of Barnet to answer the concerns we have heard about today. No-one was willing instead they sent us the following statement "Our paramount consideration is the safety and well-being of children the process of placing childrens names on the At Risk Register is a complex one requiring involvement from many partners. Doctors, Teachers health professionals and wherever possible parents. The Council has put its case through the proper complaints process and while childrens confidentiality and their best interests are involved that is where the Councils story will stay". We should make it clear that in the preparation of this programme we had the full co-operation of the Blunt family including David who very much wanted us to tell their story. Chimes The trial of the former nurse Beverly Allett ended with her conviction eventually on 4 counts of murder and a revelation that she'd had years of treatment for self inflicted wounds.

Man - It was nurse Beverley Allett convicted in 1993 of murdering 4 children in her care who brought MSBP into the headlines. One of the experts involved in her case was Dr David Southall a paediatrician and one of the Countrys

foremost authorities on MSBP. His works has resulted in many parents being prosecuted for child abuse who might not have otherwise been caught. Fluent and influential his was perhaps the leading voice on the diagnosis of the syndrome but can even he get it wrong!

Lady - Did you have a good day in school, what did you do? Reply Well, well, I not sure. You're not sure what you did in school, ha ha thats normal.

Man - Dee McClain and her son Ben at their home in South Wales. Ben developed breathing difficulties shortly after birth that became pronounced at night time. so in 1989 when he was 4 Ben took part in a 2 night sleep study test with Dr southall, that was the only time the family saw him. So Dee and Dave were amazed to learn in 1991 that Dr Southall had instigated a case conference about them.

Lady - There were people there representing is but nothing they said counted and you just had David Southall who really was very charismatic and the others were just swept along with this and were were totally ignored. Everything that we said was discounted.

Man - What was happening was that events and circumstances taken place over the years had been interpreted in a particular way. The only person who was being listened to was Dr Southall Man - Another person at the conference was Colin Hobbs a senior officer with the Community Health Council.

Colin Hobbs - My own observations having met with the family at home on a number of occasions was that they were very close, very loving, very supportive family but that was given absolutely scant regard during the course of these meetings, as though it did not matter one jot.

Man - The meeting decided that Ben would have to undergo more of Dr Southalls sleep studies if the parents refused there would be legal action. Reluctantly the couple took Ben along to hospital to his first night without them since the day he was born.

Lady - I had to leave him and walk away with him held in a Nurses lap with his arms wide open, his mouth open and screaming as I left him behind and all I wanted to do was pick him up and cuddle him and kiss him and I had to walk away (this was very emotional).

Man - After the study was over Dr South said the tests showed that Bens breathing was normal and in his view the only problems were those fabricated by Bens mother. He urged that all Dees children ve placed on the Child Protection Register under the category of grave concern. Dr Southall so reasoning is clear from the minutes of a subsequent case conference 'the assessment in this case indicates a very seriously disturbed mother whose husband has adopted a very dangerous p[assive role. She has a psychopathic personality and will need adult psychiatry.

Man - I found that allegation absolutely extraordinary.

Man - Colin Hobbs , CHC worker - I was absolutely astounded that he could make such a broad statement of such serious degree. He is a consultant paediatrician who is not qualified as far as I am concerned to deal with mental health issues.

Man - But Dr Southall was adamant before Ben could be allowed home Dee must admit that she'd abused her son and her husband Dave must agree that he'd just stood by. However, a settlement was reached which would permit Ben to return home but only after a spell in care.

Man - The body blow was in fact that Ben would have to be fostered and the thought of his going to total strangers again, that was very painful obviously but at least there was a chance that we could now rebuild the family again.

Man - Despite Dr Southall's warnings Dee and Dave maintained their innocence. 5 months later their son came home. Subsequently all their children were taken off the At Risk Register.

Dee - When you look back and you do read the case conference minutes and you see mothers a psychopath, mother has munchausens, mother has a life time of disturbed relationships you realise how incredible it is that Ben was returned.

Man - It's nearly 10 years since Ben came home and though he still has medical problems Psychologist Lisa Blakemore-Brown believes his progress since proves the family didn't pose a danger to him.

Lady - One has to wonder how we can shift from such an extreme position of saying that this mother is terribly dangerous and the children are in enormous danger and she will need long term psychiatric care to someone who is getting on with their life, raising their children and supporting them despite Ben's disorder.

Man - Lisa Blakemore-Brown -

Man - The McClain family have lodged a complaint about Dr Southall with the GMC in a completely unrelated development Dr Southall was suspended more than 18 months ago from his work as a Consultant Paediatrician while an enquiry is carried out into research work and concerns over Child Protection issues. In a statement to us Dr Southall said it was impossible for him to comment on the McClains concerns while the GMC were still considering their complaint. We invited someone from the Department of Health to discuss the issues we've heard about today but unfortunately they declined. Instead they sent a statement. Local Authorities have a statutory duty to make enquiries where they have reasonable cause for concern that a child may need protection all referrals and allegations from whatever their source must be taken seriously. The Government has set up an expert panel to review the identification of situations where children have had illnesses fabricated or induced by a carer and the DOH expects to publish the consultation guidance on safeguarding children in the next few weeks.

Man - Whatever the Governments reassurances however concern about the misdiagnosis of MSBP continues to grow. A shadow spokesman on health in the House of Lords is Earl Howell it seems critical to me that Government should look at misdiagnosis of MSBP in all the cases bar none that have been brought to my attention. There has been a misdiagnosis of MSBP and if we can get round that and find ways of avoiding that we will avoid endless heartache.

Man - But for the parents caught up in the heartache much of their anger and distress is focused on Social Workers we asked Moira Gibb Resident of the Association of Directors of Social Services how it was that people could go to Social Services for help but end up under suspicion.

Lady - We would certainly like to be able to help more families at an earlier stage when they come to us for help. There is evidence that we formulate problems as needing investigation too early and too often but it is often the way in which families actually get help. The evidence from research is if a situation is formulated as a Child at Risk a Social Worker can access resources from health and education in a way which they can't if its simply a child in need.

Man - So you have to escalate a problem do you to almost a crisis before funds become available to deal with it.

Lady - The research evidence suggests that that has been the case but you will be aware of the risks that Social Services and Social Workers run if they get this wrong.

Man - Yes - but that is granted but parents tell us that at these case conferences this culture of secrecy these meetings will have gone on before the parents are even involved the parents come onto these almost quasi court like hearings and sort of sit in the corner intimidated, isolated, largely ignored.

Lady - Well thats certainly not what we intend to achieve we have again since the early '90s been promoting working in partnership with families. 96% of children investigated as at risk remain in their families of those who are removed the vast majority return home quickly. So we recognise that in fact children need to be protected by their parents the evidence again suggest that where partnership is most easily established is where there is agreement about what the risks to the child are and in these cases that you are talking about quite clearly that is the fundamental disagreement. So it is not surprising that it is difficult and more difficult to work with families because the fundamental disagreement at the core of their discussions with each other.

Man - In the cases where parents are ostracised, where they're stigmatised the pain and the trauma goes on because of the blunders that have been made.

Lady - Well I think protecting our children is a heavy responsibility, we don't do it perfectly at all a number of organisations and professionals are involved in

trying to get it right. The agencies work together and try to understand where mistakes were made so that learning can be spread across the Authoritys to improve the services in the future. It seems to me important that evidence about what happened to families is fed back into the system, so the system could be greatly improve but I think the idea that there are lots of people maliciously accusing families is just not an accurate picture.

Man - The fact that parents are anxious about their children's health and may pester professionals and repeatedly raise concerns doesn't make them a danger to those children yet more and more support groups are dealing with more and more cases of where that appears to be the official conclusion. Jill Moss runs the Charity AYME.

Jill Moss - UIn the last 4 weeks our organisation has been supporting 2 separate families who have had their children taken away from them. Uniformed police at the door, no warning no negotiation. I've known both of the families through the charity for many months and I'm convinced that those mothers have not quote harmed their children.

Lady whose voice we heard at the beginning of the broadcast - Its very upsetting when my daughters in one place, I'm in another and we're not allowed to see each other unless we're accompanied. I do miss her very much and I'm keeping her room ready for the time she is coming home. Thats all I'm hoping for.

Face the Facts was presented by John Waite