



BLAMING THE MOTHER

For some time, the understanding of child behaviour problems tended to blame mothers. This was a catastrophic error, writes Professor Michael Fitzgerald

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It is my experience that more than 95 per cent of what mothers tell doctors is correct. A small number are unreliable informants and make diagnosis extremely difficult, especially in areas like psychiatry, where we have no biomarkers, but this can occur in paediatrics as well with Munchausen by proxy issues. These cause great difficulties for GPs, paediatricians, child psychiatrists and others where there may be fabrication of illness. This can take a lot of professional time and effort to sort out. There have been tragedies in the other direction, where mothers have been falsely blamed for the death of their children which were due to natural causes, sometimes not easily determined. Freud, in his 'mostly false theories', puts a focus on fathers, for example, sexually abusing their children. He saw this sexual abuse as causing neurosis. This, of course, does occur, but it's not universal as Freud thought originally.

Historical issues

The post-Freudian psychoanalysts and psychiatrists have mostly blamed mothers for children's problems. This is still quite strong in child psychiatry and psychology. From the mid-20th century, psychiatrists, psychologists and psychoanalysts stated that schizophrenia was caused by a so-called 'schizophrenogenic mother'. This was utterly false and caused massive, unnecessary guilt to mothers. Worse was to come with the so-called 'refrigerator mother', proposed by Kanner and Bettelheim as a cause of autism. This was utter rubbish, but is part of the tragic history of psychology and psychiatry. I worked as a junior doctor in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital for Children in London and the mantra there was to listen to mothers and pay attention to the worried mother. I have never forgotten this.

Changes in understanding

Our understanding of child and adolescent problems has utterly changed. Nevertheless, the old understanding of child

psychiatry still persists to a great extent. Now, the big treatment is parenting skills, which fills the pages of our newspapers every week and is blaming the mother by another manner, in my view. It suggests that the cause of children's problems are poor parenting skills and the so-called schizophrenogenic and refrigerator mother is with us again, through the back door. The major problems in child and adult psychiatry today are neurodevelopmental problems, which have major genetic and neurobiological factors. These problems include autism, Asperger syndrome, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and learning disability. To blame the mothers for these problems would be a tragedy, yet this is implied in the parenting skills deficit diagnosis. Even more tragic is that the mothers blame themselves very quickly, when they are given this so-called psychiatric/psychological 'diagnosis'. Many of these children need extra educational resources in school and they will often thrive with this. These conditions are very common with a diagnosis of autism being one-in-65 (ADHD, 3-5 per cent of the population). Parents can spend up to 20 years searching for the correct diagnosis, through umpteen visits to psychologists and psychiatrists. I have seen a number of people aged 60 who have, in actual fact, spent their lifetime searching for the correct neurodevelopmental diagnosis. This causes frustration for GPs, parents, school teachers and the people themselves.

Time to stop

Psychiatry is now primary neurodevelopmental psychiatry and it is time to stop blaming mothers. Of course, about 5 per cent, or less, of mothers will play a role in the development of child psychiatric problems – some mothers may have a mental illness themselves. Psychiatry and medicine are complicated.

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