

Diagnosis of Munchausen's Syndrome by an Electronic Health Record Search

To the Editor:

A 29-year-old man presented to the hospital complaining of seizures, galactorrhea, and acromegaly. He reported a family history of multiple endocrine neoplasia type 2 in both parents, and "genetically proven" multiple endocrine neoplasia type 2 in 2 of 17 siblings. His stated occupation was fraud investigator for a telephone company. He reported a recent hospitalization for the same symptoms at a different medical center, and consented to release of information from other hospitals and family members. Multiple attempts to contact family members were unsuccessful, and there was no record of admissions to other hospitals. An extensive endocrine evaluation was negative for multiple endocrine neoplasia. This, when combined with his dramatic style, implausible genetic history, and unusual name (Arkandy McAnders), caused us to suspect Munchausen syndrome. However, we had no evidence of recurrent hospitalizations, an essential feature of Munchausen syndrome.¹

We conducted an electronic health record search within the Baylor hospital system in an attempt to identify other hospitalizations by our patient using different aliases. Using only the first 2 letters of his last stated name and date of birth, 7 matches were revealed among 1.9 million patients within the Baylor hospital electronic health record system since 2001. Records of the 7 matches were reviewed, and 5 had presentations nearly identical to that of our patient. In a second search, using date-of-birth matches only, an additional 95 patient encounters were returned, and 5 additional aliases for our patient were uncovered. Overall, during a 9-month period, the patient had at least 16 hospital encounters with similar symptoms at 6 different Baylor hospitals, and used at least 11 different aliases, several of which resembled classic Roman, Greek, and Biblical names (Table). The discovery of multiple aliases was possible only because the patient used the same date of birth on multiple occasions. Prior records did not reveal evidence that Munchausen syndrome was ever considered before.

Funding: None.

Conflict of Interest: None.

Authorship: Both authors had access to the data and a role in writing the manuscript.

Requests for reprints should be addressed to Thomas G. Van Dinter, Jr, MD, Department of Internal Medicine, Baylor University Medical Center, 3500 Gaston Avenue, Dallas, TX 75246.

E-mail address: thomvan@baylorhealth.edu

Table Eleven Aliases Discovered Using Two Different EHR Search Criteria

"Mc" and DOB Search	DOB Search Only
Arkandy McAnders (4)	Orphacious White (2)‡
Ananious McAnders*	Ananious Geter*
Octavious McAnderson†	Adrian Geter
Aaron McKnight	Adrian Michaels
Australia McTurner (2)	Lamont Adrian
Australia McFear	

Note: The true name of the patient is not mentioned in the report or the Table.

Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of times the alias was used. DOB = date of birth.

*Ananias: name of 3 persons in the New Testament.

†Octavius or Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (Augustus) was the first Roman emperor.

‡Orpheus: a poet and musician who charmed Hades in Greek mythology.

This case illustrates several features of Munchausen syndrome, most notably pathologic lying (pseudologia fantastica), peregrination (traveling), and use of aliases.^{2,3} To our knowledge, Munchausen syndrome diagnosed by an electronic health record search has not been reported. Legal and ethical questions may arise from such searches, but at this time there is no case law or precedent to establish guidelines.^{4,5} We conclude that an electronic health record search may be warranted to establish the diagnosis of Munchausen when done under the ethical guideline of beneficence (ie, to prevent iatrogenic disease), preferably in conjunction with a Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act compliance officer.

Thomas G. Van Dinter, Jr, MD

Brian J. Welch, MD

Baylor University Medical Center

Dallas, Tex

doi:10.1016/j.amjmed.2009.03.035

References

- American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edn, text revision (DSM-IV-TR). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association; 2000.
- Asher R. Munchausen's syndrome. *Lancet*. 1951;1:339-341.
- Pallis CA, Bamji AN. McIlroy was here. Or was he? *Br Med J*. 1979;1:973-975.
- Eisendrath SJ, Rand DC, Feldman MD. Factitious disorders and litigation. In: Feldman MD, Eisendrath SJ, eds. *The Spectrum of Factitious Disorders*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing; 1996:65-81.
- Kass FC. Identification of persons with Munchausen's syndrome: ethical problems. *Gen Hosp Psychiatry*. 1985;7:195-200.