

Fact-Checking a Factitious Illness: What Role Should Social Media Play?

Information obtained from social media can help diagnose factitious disorder—and protect patients from iatrogenic harm.



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Background/Significance

- Factitious disorder—a condition characterized by illness deception—is often difficult to diagnose.
- We present two cases of factitious disorder that were confirmed using publicly available information from patients' social media profiles. (Identifying features in both cases have been changed to preserve patient anonymity.)



Cases

- Ms. A, a woman in her late teenage years with a reported medical history of Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, POTS, and gastroparesis (on enteral nutrition), was repeatedly hospitalized with central line infections.
- She was diagnosed by the consultation-liaison psychiatry team with factitious disorder and borderline personality disorder.
- Her social media accounts featured stylized selfies taken from the hospital bed. Photos posted from other settings were inconsistent with the patient's claim of complete TPN dependence.

- Ms. B., a woman in her mid-20s with a long history of constipation with multiple surgeries, including right hemicolectomy, was admitted with incarceration of a prolapsed ileostomy.
- Psychiatry was consulted for concern for factitious disorder.
- During the hospitalization, the patient was suspected of changing the settings on her ketamine infusion and tampering with her stoma.
- Records indicated that she had claimed to have had Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis on different presentations, though tests failed to confirm either diagnosis.
- A social media search disclosed an ostomy-related YouTube page and Instagram account.

Discussion

- Many cases of factitious disorder go unrecognized and unaddressed.
- Given this difficulty, social media sources may provide a potentially valuable source of collateral information.
- Although searching patients' online information may raise ethical concerns, such investigations can play an important role in protecting patients from serious self-induced and iatrogenic injuries.

References:

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