INTRODUCTION

Factitious disorders involve the feigning or self-induction of ailments, physical, emotional or both, in the service of assuming the “sick role”. First described in 1951, Factitious Disorder imposed on self (Munchausen Syndrome) was followed by Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, in 1977. In 2000, the increasing use of the Internet to provide information and support for illness led Feldman to identify Munchausen by Internet (MBI).

Support groups online are invaluable sources of compassion for patients and their families, yet may be misused by individuals who offer false stories of personal illness. New cases of MBI are identified regularly, both in scientific literature and the media. Besides misappropriation of the online groups of support, some people create fake Facebook profiles, sometimes of multiple personae intertwined in dramatic plots of near-fatal illnesses and recoveries.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

Illustrate a case of MBI, as was depicted in a reporter’s investigation story called “A Rede”, broadcasted in January 2019 on Portuguese national TV. This case serves to illustrate the ease of carrying deception online, the difficulties in detection and the damaging impact on those deceived.

A review of academic research and case studies of MBI reported online or in the media was conducted.

THE REPORTER’S INVESTIGATION STORY

The patient’s identity was preserved, but we learn that she is a 43 year-old school teacher, divorced and a mother of two. She fabricated the Facebook profile of Sofia, an attractive doctor suffering from cancer, as well as those of a number of her alleged friends and relatives. She received comfort and attention from dozens of real Facebook users. She went so far as to fake the death of Sofia and watch the torrent of grief from the real Facebook users who were being deceived. She also produced other storylines with the multiple personae of her creation, all of which were very dramatic and disease-oriented.

INDICATORS OF POSSIBLE MUNCHAUSEN BY INTERNET

| The posts consistently duplicate material in other posts, in books or on health-related websites. | The characteristics of the supposed illness emerge as caricatures. |
| Near-fatal bouts of illness alternate with miraculous recoveries. | The claims are fantastic, contradicted by subsequent posts or flatly disproved. |
| There are continual dramatic events in the person’s life, especially when other group members have become the focus of attention. | Others apparently posting on behalf of the patient (family members, friends) have identical patterns of writing. |

CONCLUSIONS

Instead of hospitals, Internet is a new audience for those seeking the emotional gratification of commandeering the sick role. Not yet acknowledged in DSM-5, the MBI is increasing and has a damaging impact on both patients and those deceived.