The Psychosomatic approach to maternal biopsychosocial health: An underused pathway to limit harm

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Context: The psychosomatic approach evaluates symptoms comprehensively and underscores the Hippocratic injunction to "do no harm". Limited animal and human studies report a negative impact of maternal biopsychosocial distress on infant development and teenage behaviour which can be rectified.

Objective: Understanding the generation of maternal psychosomatic disease and its impact on the maternal-infant dyad by evaluating biopsychosocial factors.

Methods: A large cross-sectional study (n=284) using domiciliary interviews and a sample case analysis.

Main outcome measures: Maternal biopsychosocial morbidity and its impact.

Results: Recruits were 184 post-caesarean primiparae and 100 vaginally delivered. Besides physical symptoms, psychological symptoms of dysphoria and social ill-health were identified. Irrespective of delivery mode, a statistically significant association of severe dysphoria with maternal wound problems, incontinence and sexual problems was detected. Forty-two mothers could not cope with managing the baby and in eight infant bonding was affected.

A 28-year-old who had an emergency caesarean for fetal distress was very disappointed. She was irritable, weepy and tired, besides suffering from anal incontinence. She had not bonded, wanted to be away from the infant and "felt guilty of this feeling". She almost lost her infant to meningitis and then began "tolerating" him. After apt evaluation anti-depressants were started but she could not cope with her infant's "incessant crying".

Conclusions: In this large sample statistical significance was reached for certain biopsychosocial associations, but not for others which were nevertheless clinically important. The case highlights this in the disrupted infant bonding through impaired maternal biopsychosocial health. The potential for ongoing harm in the absence of psychosomatic evaluation is affirmed.

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