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Educational Technologies

The internet as a resource for teaching students about the features of psychosis: a case report

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ABSTRACT

Patients with florid psychosis are not always available to be interviewed for teaching purposes. In this regard, resources on the web can prove useful. We sought to describe a case of psychosis, available on the internet, which has potential as a teaching tool. The material identified included hand written notes and audio recordings by a woman who subsequently murdered her son and completed suicide. These materials were released by the police. The materials provide evidence of bizarre delusions, auditory hallucinations and lack of insight. There is also a suggestion of a degree of healthy functioning, insofar as one recording apologizes to the business where the murder-suicide was later performed. The internet contains potential valuable patient materials that may be used for teaching medical students.

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INTRODUCTION

There are many potential symptoms and signs of psychosis [1,2], yet locating those features for teaching purposes can be difficult. In many hospital settings, patients with clear signs and symptoms of psychosis may not always be present (for example, due to effective treatment with psychotropic drugs, or early discharge to supported care in the community), or those patients with psychotic features may choose not to participate in teaching [3,4]. In this context, educators may look to other sources for teaching students about psychosis.

We have recently found a case on the web [5], that is potentially useful for educating students about psychosis. By examining this case in detail, we suggest that web resources may serve as a useful teaching tool, both in their own right and to complement direct patient experiences. The use of the internet in this

manner augments other materials (e.g. journals and health-related sites) on the web, and continues the tradition of using a variety of tools and methods [6-9] to enhance medical teaching. Ethics approval was not required for this study as it analyses a case report that has been published in the public domain.

THE CASE

Print report

Marie Moore was the 44 year old mother of a 20 year old (Mitchell); they lived in Florida [5]. Marie was no longer with her husband Charles Moore, but had a new boyfriend. She had been compulsorily detained in a psychiatric hospital in 2003 and had a history of attempted suicide. Mitchell lived with his girlfriend, who was an employee of his father's construction company.

In early April 2009, Marie and Mitchell went to the "Shoot Straight" shooting range north of Orlando. They took turns shooting at a target. A police report stated, "They seemed to be getting along fine". Without warning, while Mitchell was taking aim, Marie stepped up behind him and shot him in the head. She then turned the gun on herself. Both died.

The print report also contains security video of Marie and smoke issuing from the muzzle of her pistol when she shoots her son.

This murder-suicide was carefully planned. Marie's family found three notes and six tape-recording in which she stated her intentions and reasons. All of these are available on the web [5].

Hand written notes

"Note #1" is 35 words. Marie wrote this to her boyfriend and addressed him as "Dear King". She states that she loves him, that the title to her trucks are in order (implying they are to become his) and that, "I had to save my son".

"Note #3" is 55 words. It is also intended for her boyfriend and also concerns money being left behind. Marie then states, "I had to save my son and send myself to hell". She continues, "You save yourself and go to heaven with Mitch I love you forever + ever". It is signed "Failed Queen".

"Note #2" is 39 words (Figure 1).

King
The keys I left
in the truck. You
have the signed
over title. Get it
19133 combination
I Love you
I'm so sorry.
I had to send
my son to heaven
and myself to
Hell
Failed Queen

Figure 1. A note from a woman (Failed Queen) to her boyfriend (King). As with her other notes, she mentions leaving her estate, and "I had to send my son to heaven and myself to Hell".

From these notes, it can be deduced there was a warm relationship between their author and her boyfriend, and that she had some grandiose delusions. There were

also suggestions of paranoid delusions, lack of insight and that the author represented a danger to herself and her son. Because of the brevity of these notes, no comment can be made as to the presence or otherwise of disorder of the form of thought.

Audio recordings

Six recordings (totaling 36.5 minutes) were made available to police by the family. For current purposes, it is sufficient to present only a transcription of Recording #1 and the start of Recording #4.

Recording #1

"Hi King. I am sorry to leave you like this. This is a horrifying thing. I hate leaving you behind, but I had to save my son and send myself to Hell, for what I've done. I've screwed everything up for us. When you made me a Queen, God tried to make me a Queen too, then you're really a King. I'm a fallen Angel. But it took me the longest time to figure out what God has done to me, for being one. I made a big mistake accidentally getting put in that mental hospital. I got so confused. Every time I got out I ended up back in there, I thought that was what God wanted me. But everything I told you in there God was telling me and it's true, I had to save Mitchell from getting his penis cut off and you have to save yourself from getting your head chopped off. And you have a gun and you can do it. I have to die and go to Hell so there can be a thousand years peace on Earth. God has turned me into the Anti-Christ. I thank God, that he wanted you to have sex with me I can't that he didn't want you to get rid of me totally. I can't believe that I've lived this long. All my journals have nothing bad about you or any one in them. The only thing is what I got in that Rehab that time, that's the only bad thing. Everything was just what happened to me. I have journals from before I shot myself in the leg in March second 2003 when I ... My first two journal talk about everything that happened and my promises to God and how I got out of mental hospital and when I was listed to Judas sake everyone and then how I got confused and messed up and thought I was damned to hell and everything. My journals are the only thing that I have to explain my side of the story and what happened. I know that you're hating my guts right now, I know that you're right torn up inside. Things are going to get worse, things are going to get worse and worse, the longer I live. I never meant to live this long, I never meant to live begin with. That day I was supposed to kill myself, I came over to your house and I told you, and you up[...] in the parking lot, I mean I don't know if you remember, but you looked at me and you said, "Don't kill yourself, that's sick" and walked off. I was supposed to kill myself, I would have been a hero and a queen. And my son would have been a prince and rich and you would

have been the king. I freaked out, I forgot, I would have been a hero and I would have been in heaven and I would have been a queen and rich, would've been rich, and you would have been a king and my mother and father, brother, wouldn't have to go to Hell, and. Every time I got put in the mental home it got worse and worse. I got threatened over and over again, I couldn't stay up all night, I told you I had to stay up all night, everyone kept making me go to bed. All I know is that when I look back, how shitty I was thinking and all the negative and how the Devil got to me. He destroyed me. He made me destroy all of us. I hate his guts and I'd give him hell, all in hell, all the time I'm in there the Devil would never get any peace from me. Turn to God, I love God, after all the horror and torment I've lived in for all these years. Writing about it, thank you for letting me write. I wanted to tell you thousands of times, I wanted to tell you to your face, but you would've Baker Acted me [had her involuntarily committed], you would've thought I was crazy, and I wouldn't have been able to be with Mitch and you, and I wouldn't've been able to try and save Mitch. I've been trying over and over again, last year May 2nd, on his birthday, the day after Duke died, that's when I was supposed to die with Mitch on his 20th birthday, and I was going to leave him \$25 000 and now, I kept failing and failing and I was only using a 22 and then last month I saw on the news that a 16 year old shot his dad in the back of the head with a 22 and himself and they both lived and now I'm wondering if me and Mitch would have just lived or whether God would have taken us that day. It's been horrifying every day thinking of suicide trying to act normal trying to be as happy as I could in my last days and I didn't want to spend one day without you to the very end, and my son. And I'll pay for ever and ever for what I have done. I just hope that you can forgive me and when you get to Heaven tell my son Mitch I love him. Because I could never tell him to my face because before I died because he would get suspicious or he'd wonder if I was going to kill myself or kill him. I had to act totally normal. Please. Please forgive me. Please get everyone to get close to God. The [? rapture] is going to happen, it's going to happen anyways. September 2009 would be six years that I would have been the Anti-Christ and that's when God would have killed me anyways. I had to save my son. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you in person. I'm sorry to leave you like this. Thank you for making me so happy as happy as I could be all these years in all my misery and torment. Sorry for hiding things from you that I wanted to tell you so badly looking into your eyes and my son's eyes but I would scared you guys to death and you would both Baker Act [committed to hospital] me for sure. And I'd sit in there suffering wondering every day when God was going to get you two. I'd be tortured to death. I'm so stupid I got my

own legs chopped off. I'm so stupid I got my own legs chopped off. God! Not only did I get my own legs chopped off I got myself buried up to my neck so the ants can eat off my face, beaten to death burned at the stake alive, and then gassed in Hell. Do you think that I meant to do that? I didn't mean to do any of it, all I had to do was think wrong, make the wrong decisions. The Devil's going to pay, I guarantee you, the Devil's going to pay. He better go to Hell when I go to Hell. He just called to me a minute ago while I was trying to make this tape, every time I hear your voice, God I want to tell you so bad. You brought such joy to my life meeting you the day I met you was so wonderful, it was no accident. We were meant to be together. We were born to be together. I don't know how all this happened me being the Queen and you being the King and Mitch being a Prince. Mitch isn't even your son. I don't know how all this happened. It's not in the Bible. No more forgiveness for me, that's not in the Bible. And the Anti-Christ being a woman and not being able to eat and drink if she messes up, is she supposed to be a Queen and if she's not a Queen she turn into the Anti-Christ. I just. All I know is I look back and I've screwed up and I'm still screwing up, and I just can't take it any more I can't take hiding in my own flesh from you and everybody else. I've been to preachers. I've talked to people, everybody I've asked questions to starts freaking out and asking what medicine I'm on, and wanting to Baker Act [commit to psychiatric hospital] me and I am not sick."

Recording #4 (start only)

"Shoot Straight and Police. I'm sorry to do this in your place of business, but I had to save my son, God made me a Queen and I failed, I'm a fallen angel. He turned me into the Anti-Christ, I got turned into the Anti-Christ September 3rd 2003. It took me a longest time to figure that out, I didn't know for a longest time. I had to save my son from getting his penis chopped off, raped and tortured to death. I had to kill myself so there could be a thousand years of peace on earth and send myself to Hell for where I belong for messing up our lives. The Devil and God were both trying to talk to me and tell me what to do. I kept getting confused. I was trying to listen to God. I wanted so bad to be a Queen. There was not supposed to be no Obama, there was supposed to be a Queen and a King. The end of the world is coming...."

These verbal statements have advantages over the hand written notes, giving a more comprehensive account of the form and content of thought. In addition, in the verbal form rather than the transcript, one hears the terrible suffering and fear of the speaker.

In "Recording #1" there are many invaluable pieces of information. Marie speaks quickly and mentions a lot

of topics, but we do not believe there is major disorder of the form of thought. All of the topics she speaks about are important and/or dangerous to her, but for the most part there are no major derailments. There is, however, some illogicality, defined by Andreasen [10] as “a pattern of speech in which conclusions are reached that do not follow logically...It may take the form of faulty inductive inferences”. Marie acknowledges that God and the Devil have supernatural powers, but she then states that when she is in Hell “all the time I’m in there the Devil will never get any peace from me”. It is illogical that Marie could trouble the Devil in any serious way. However, as Andreasen[10] points out, illogicality is difficult to separate from delusional material.

The delusional system includes that Marie believes she is responsible for many bad things happening (or about to happen), including that her son (Mitch) is about to have his penis chopped off, and that her boyfriend is about to have his head chopped off. She states that she feels guilty and that she blames herself for “screwing up”.

She states that she has had her legs “chopped off”. But this is not the case, and has the nature of a nihilistic delusion. Along with the feeling of guilt, this delusion suggests psychotic depression. The need to kill her son to save him might also point in this direction. She is distressed and tearful, but whether this is cause or effect of her delusions is uncertain.

Marie states that both God and the Devil have been talking to her, suggesting hallucinations. Marie also says that she has been placed in hospital against her will on a number of occasions, but there is no insight, and in this and other audio recordings she adamantly states “I am not sick”. It is not unusual for grandiose delusions and paranoid delusions to co-exist, and this case is a fine example.

The beginning of “Recording #4” is of interest because it suggests that, while Marie was preparing to murder her son and kill herself, she was functioning in a considerate “normal” manner toward others. In this example, she apologizes to the owners of the shooting gallery where these acts will be performed, “I’m sorry to do this in your place of business”. She also mentions the Police as if being apologizing in advance for causing them work.

DISCUSSION

Over the past two decades, the internet has become an increasingly used educational resource in medicine for a variety of stakeholders, including students, clinicians, patients and patients’ families. Because it is relatively easy to post health-related information on websites

compared to publishing it in conventional formats (including textbooks and peer reviewed journals), caution is required when viewing health-related data on the web. The US Food and Drug administration recommends that users evaluate the quality of web-based information by ascertaining [11]: (i) who runs the web site? (ii) what is the purpose of the site? (iii) what is the original source of the information on the site? (iv) how is the information on the site documented? (v) how is information reviewed before it is posted on the site? (vi) how current is the information on the site? (vii) how does the site choose links to other sites?, and (viii) how does the site manage interactions with visitors? Whether high quality information on the internet is a also useful *educational* resource will depend on the needs of the student, the particular educational goals and whether that information is readily and freely available elsewhere.

Although case reports that are published in peer reviewed journals are a traditional educational tool in medicine [12,13], the use of case reports on the internet (i.e. beyond online journals) has received negligible attention and has not been formally studied as an educational device. Potentially, a large audience can be rapidly reached through publication of cases on the internet, enhancing the teaching value of such cases. At the same time, for living patients, possible problems - which can still occur in print journals - include ensuring, prior to internet publication, that there is patient consent to publish the case and preserving patient anonymity; if a patient is deceased, permission for publication should be sought from a relative. Once a case is freely available on the web, health professionals - academics and clinicians - can assist students and the wider community by seeking to clarify, explain and synthesize key aspects of the case (including providing opinions about diagnoses where these are lacking or inaccurate, albeit without the advantage of having had direct patient contact). It may be argued that in helping the general community in this way, these professionals are also discharging their ethical duties of “beneficence” (“doing good”) and “non-maleficence” (“avoiding harm”).

For the reasons mentioned earlier in this paper (effective treatment with psychotropic medication, early discharge, and patient reluctance to participate in teaching), it can sometimes be difficult in hospitals to locate signs and symptoms of psychosis for teaching purposes. In this paper, we have reported a case which is available on the web, and that includes notes and audio recordings by a now deceased person. We have transcribed one audio recording and made some comments about the signs and symptoms. Naturally, some might interpret these features differently, but the value of this case to students appears considerable. To

supplement other teaching, and after due consideration of the above-mentioned issues pertaining to patient and family consent and preservation of anonymity, it may also be worthwhile to explore the internet for case material pertaining to other psychiatric illnesses.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

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