



Brief Communication

100 years of lost opportunity. Missed descriptions of child abuse in the 19th century and beyond

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Introduction

The purpose of this short article is to explore 19th century cases of likely or certain child abuse which were either not considered as such at the time, or if confirmed, sadly forgotten until the rediscovery of child abuse as a serious paediatric condition in the latter half of the 20th century. The 19th century marked the dawn of industrialization upon the world, and the effects of this upon society and its attitudes during this period were dramatic. The great French novelist Victor Hugo saw “the three problems of the age – the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of woman by starvation and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night” (Hugo, 1998).

In the early 19th century conditions for families and children were very hard indeed with child labor having a high prevalence. Although child labor is now considered to be abhorrent, as Heywood (2005) pointed out, the issue is not so clear-cut: “The costs of working at a tender age had to be set against the benefits of earning a wage and combating the debilitating effects of poverty.” In 1828, Villermé had already recognized the multitude of interacting factors which contributed to the excess mortality and morbidity of children from poorer backgrounds.

“I do not seek to establish whether the poor succumb most readily to their lack of nourishment; to the poor quality of their food; to their excessive work; to the bad air; to illness brought on by their trades, humidity, unhealthy lodgings, squalor or overcrowding; to the anxiety of being unable to raise a family; or even to the intemperate habits common amongst them” (Villermé, 1828).

This multiple interaction demonstrates that progress in child health or child protection cannot be defined within the context of a single issue. Also, it needs to be emphasized that the grinding nature of poverty forces unpleasant and difficult choices upon children and their families.

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Infanticide, the severest form of child abuse, has occurred throughout history and has been well described elsewhere (Langer, 1974; Smith, 1975a, 1975b). Child abuse too has long been noted outside the medical profession (Lynch, 1985). Indeed, the noted essayist Montaigne eloquently described its consequences in his essay “On Anger.” “Children are crippled and knocked stupid by such batterings: yet our judicial system takes no note of it, as though it were not the very limbs of our state which are being put out of joint and maimed” (Montaigne, 1592). The English Parliament passed an Act in 1624 “to prevent the murdering of bastard children” (Hoffer & Hull, 1981). However, the consequences of the physical abuse of children was only relatively recently recognized by the medical profession itself in the 20th century. It was with Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, and Silver (1962) and their seminal paper “The Battered Child Syndrome” that brought this condition not only to medical but also to public attention. However, the medical literature and popular fiction long before that time gave clear and unambiguous histories, which detailed abuse. Unfortunately, within the medical world a disease does not exist until it is given a name (Asher, 1986).

The great novelists of the 19th century enlightened and educated society to the plight of children, single mothers, as well as the poor and stirred society to make changes. Taking just one such example, Hugo’s “Les Misérables”—set in the early 19th century, there is the description of Cosette, a neglected and abused orphan; “The whole person of this child, her gait, her attitude, the sound of her voice, the intervals between one word and another, her looks, her silence, her least motion, expressed and uttered a single idea: fear” (Hugo, 1998).

It is clear, however, that children who had suffered abuse through neglect were being seen by the medical services of the time as the following case from the London Hospital, recorded in the 1832 *Lancet*, demonstrates:

“About nine o’clock on the evening of the 20th, a little child one year and three quarters old, was brought to this hospital with the back part of the head, neck and arms very severely burned, from the clothes having caught fire. Wine and laudanum were assiduously administered and linseed oil and turpentine were applied to the parts, but reaction was not restored. The little sufferer lingered till about three o’clock the following afternoon when it died. The nurse says that the parents of this child lost another in the same ward about five months since by the same means. Let us hope this is the last of the offspring whose safety appears to be so grossly neglected” (Burn, 1832).

The case is described merely under the heading of “Burn”. Deaths in childhood due to accidents are still a major cause in the youngest age groups and neglect is an important contributing factor. Nowadays all child healthcare professionals would hope a more thorough investigation would be undertaken to ensure that there was no repetition.

Ambroise Tardieu

In 1860, Ambroise Tardieu (1818–1879), Professor of Legal Medicine at the University of Paris presented a long paper describing 32 cases of clear child abuse of whom 18 died (Roche, Fortin, Labbé, Brown, & Chadwick (2005); Tardieu, 1860). Tardieu gave a clear breakdown of the different violent methods used, the considerable variety of pathology seen and the parental denial and indifference to the suffering of their children. Tardieu described how recognition and intervention successfully transformed these children:

“One important characteristic to be noted is the speed with which their facial expression changes as soon as the children are taken in by public charities or placed under legal protection, and are thus shielded from their daily torture. This general change in their constitution is more or less profound, according to the severity and duration of the abuse” (Tardieu, 1860).

Tardieu’s paper, with its unambiguous, detailed descriptions and categorical conclusions of physical abuse being the cause of these injuries in children, made a challenge to society to do something urgently to prevent maltreatment. Unfortunately, it is one of the great tragedies of child health care that this pioneering work which was “the first in which the concept of a battered child, as presented by Kempe and his colleagues 101 years later was clearly stated” remained in obscurity for over a century (Silverman, 1972). This condemned “child victims . . . to suffer abuse and neglect without the support of the medical community” during that time (Labbé, 2005). These points have been addressed elsewhere by Roche et al., 2005 and Silverman (1972). It is also pertinent to mention that later in 1873, Tardieu published “A Medico-Legal Study of Assaults On Decency,” which described French rape cases from 1859–1869. Of more than 11,000 victims, nearly 80% were children (Tardieu, 1873).

Samuel West and acute periostial swellings

In 1888, Samuel West presented a paper to the Medical Society of London entitled “Acute Periostial Swellings in Several Young Infants of the Same Family Probably Rickety in Nature.” West wrote:

“A child, aged 5 weeks, was brought by its mother, with the statement that its left arm had “dropped.” A swelling, apparently periostial, occupied the middle third of the shaft of the humerus. It was exquisitely painful and tender. The movements of the arm were perfect but the child kept the arm still on account of the pain which movement caused. Similar swellings were found on the right humerus and on the left femur. There were some slight bosses on the ribs,

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