A case report on selective mutism of a 12 year old girl in Bangladesh untreated for 7 years

M Zubair
Department of Psychiatry, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, Shahbagh, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Introduction

- Selective mutism is a relatively rare but serious childhood condition
- Characterized by a consistent failure to speak in specific settings (school, social situations) despite speaking normally in others (at home)
- It is often co-morbid with other psychiatric disorders
- We describe a case of selective mutism highlighting the consequences of untreated psychiatric illness due to lack of awareness

Case History

- A 12-year-old girl from a low socio-economic condition was referred to the psychiatry department because she did not speak to anyone outside of her home environment for the last 8 years despite speaking normally at home
- She communicates only non-verbally outside.
- She refused to go to school for the last 6 years but is able to continue her studies under the supervision of home tutors, with whom she speaks normally.
- Her family thought she is just shy and they contacted a psychiatrist 1 year ago, only when they felt that she needed to get admitted into a school for standardised education.
- She also developed fear of contamination and was spending more than 1 hour washing her hands daily for the last 1 year.
- All of her physical examinations were normal

Mental State Examination

- She was well-dressed
- Eye-contact was established but not maintained
- Rapport could not be established
- Completely mute but followed commands
- Answered to questions with yes or no gestures
- Her mood, thought, perception, cognitive function and insight to her condition could not be elicited
- When she was given a written questionnaire, she did not provide any answers

Provisional Diagnosis

Selective mutism with obsessive compulsive disorder

Management

- She was being treated with Tab. Sertraline 50mg for the last 1 year
- Her fear of contamination and time required in washing her hands reduced, but she remained mute outside home
- She was admitted into the psychiatry department for further evaluation
- She was managed with Cap. Fluoxetine 20mg
- No improvement in verbal communication
- Psychotherapy was advised but she did not engage

Discussion

- Selective mutism affects approximately 1% of the child population
- Typically onset is between 2 and 5 years of age
- Usually not recognized until children start school
- Children exhibit significant social and academic impairment
- This case depicts the complexity of co-morbid diagnoses in child psychiatry and the importance of individualized care
- The more the duration of untreated illness, the bleaker the outcome

Conclusion

- Early recognition for selective mutism is vital to ensure better outlook for the affected children
- Awareness campaign regarding child and adolescent mental health conditions are of paramount importance in countries with low socio-economic conditions

References