

# The Witch Hunt is on Again

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Remember when mothers of schizophrenics were labeled "schizophrenogenic" because of the widely held cultural belief that in some nefarious way, mothers caused schizophrenia? Those may have been the "good old days!"

Then it was "known" that mothers caused schizophrenia in their children, but just how they did this remained a mystery, with theories overlapping, contradicting, generally nebulous and ever-changing. Now it is "known" exactly how mothers can cause symptoms of schizophrenia: they (and fathers) abuse their children sexually.

Here is an American middle class case history of the '90s.

Eric, age 19, the youngest of three children, has lived in, at best, a "dungeons and dragons" world for most of the last eight years. He has had a violent temper, has been hospitalized twice in psychiatric wards. There is schizophrenia on both sides of the family.

Eric has always had severe allergies. When he was a child, there always had to be an adult in the background able to use an epinephrine filled syringe in case he suffered anaphylactic shock from eating something that, to him, could be lethal. Mary, his mother, spent many nights bringing him through asthma attacks. He had a thirty foot fall several years ago which left him not only with a rod in his spine, but also with a vision problem: seeing auras around people and objects and seeing colors both too bright and beyond the normal spectrum.

In her early search for help for her son, Mary took him to an Orthomolecular physician who prescribed a regimen for Eric which included vitamins and minerals. He soon refused to take any "pills" because they made his urine "smell funny". He was later given thiorazine and other psychoactive drugs.

Eric was a junior in high school and the holder of a black belt in karate when he severely beat his mother; this time she feared

for her life. It took three policemen to subdue him and he was held in jail for several weeks because he had taken a knife to a friend just two weeks before. Eric's father refused to forgive his mother because the police had been called in both instances.

Mary has not seen Eric since they both appeared in court after the beating two years ago. Mary said at the time that she still loved Eric but was afraid to live with him. He was sent to live with his father's sister out of state, then spent some time in a hospital. By the time he returned to his home town, Mary had moved out of what had been an increasingly unhappy and then dangerous situation. Last year Mary did talk to the therapist Eric's father found for him after his last psychiatric hospitalization. Mary said she liked the man and hoped that he could do Eric some good. She told the therapist that she wanted to help Eric and would like to talk to him, but only if they could have a real dialogue. She thought the therapist agreed.

Months after her visit, she received the following letter from the therapist.

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Dear Mary,

As you probably are aware your son, Eric has been working with me in therapy recently regarding issues of abuse, including sexual abuse, that he experienced at your hands while living with you. In our meeting together you informed me that you were willing to do whatever you could to help Eric. It is in response to Eric's revelations and your offer to help that I am writing now to request that you come into therapy with Eric at some point in the future to help him sort this out and to reduce the long term impact of this on him.

Prior to such a meeting I would want you to have been in some therapy regarding your actions. I believe that you can best help Eric once you have a better grasp of what caused

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2. Both letters are verbatim; only names, dates and numbers have been changed or omitted.

you to abuse him and once you have learned a way you can help him now. I am aware of some very good therapists at the County Mental Health Center. They are located at the Court House which I believe is on 1 st. I think it would be desirable to see a therapist who is experienced in working with sexual abuse.

After reading this letter please call me to confirm your plans to help Eric get through this difficult part of his life. I can be reached at ( ) as well as the number on the letterhead. Mary, I look forward to seeing this worked out between you and Eric. Enclosed please find a note that he has written you regarding his desire to discuss this. Please do not contact him directly until he gives permission. Currently Eric would view your calling him as another violation. I think it important that he be given a sense of control regarding the future contact between you. Right now he is wanting you to see him with me in a protected environment and then only after you have sought some therapy for your part in his problems.

Contact me as soon as possible as I will be out of town next month.

Yours truly,

\_\_\_\_\_, ACSW, LCSW

The enclosed note from Eric said:

Mother,

I would like to talk to you later about things like why did you abuse me and why did you mess up the family like this. I would only like to talk about it after you've been in therapy for a while and get yourself straightened out.

Eric Jones

Mary was stunned, both by the accusations themselves and by the assumption of guilt by the therapist. And she was afraid of what might happen next.

After twenty-five years of being a full-time wife and mother, Mary was tentatively rebuilding a life of her own. She says she was just beginning to feel that with her new job and her own apartment, she was gaining control of her own life when the letter arrived to shatter her new world.

Recovering her equilibrium somewhat, Mary responded through her attorney, categorically denying all of the allegations. Eric's note she dismissed as being from an angry teenager under the influence of his counselor.

The therapist told her lawyer that he had "heard it all before" and that Mary was "in denial". (Just as in the "good old days", there is jargon to cover every contingency.)

Why is the witch hunt on again, and in a more virulent form than before? How can a social worker at a distance presume to know that a mother is guilty of *any* accusation and order her to act accordingly?

Parents had reason to hope that the dark days of psychiatry were over when many psychiatrists returned to the medical model of schizophrenia. Even though in practice "medical" usually meant only that these doctors used psychotropic drugs rather than searching for possible physical causes of the symptoms, at least it appeared that the name calling and blame were over. Obviously, they are not.

Although psychiatrists have been turning again to the practice of medicine, a growing population of mental health workers without medical background or authority has countered the trend. Since they are not allowed to practice medicine, these mental health professionals have a vested interest in the theory that mental illness is socially caused and can be cured socially. Believing this, they helped close the state mental hospitals so that patients could return to the "therapeutic community". Such mental health professionals usually consider that there is no such thing as mental illness: it is a myth, a label. According to this thinking, patients become "clients" who have emotional or behavioral problems induced by society, particularly by dysfunctional families, specifically by parents, usually by mothers. Schizophrenics are lumped together with individuals who have garden variety anxiety, depression, job stress or the latest syndrome.

A California treatment center for adult survivors of childhood abuse, cited by Lawrence Wright<sup>1</sup> in a recent *New Yorker* article, lists the following symptoms of unremembered abuse: "*mood swings, panic disorder, substance abuse, rage, flashbacks, depression, hopelessness, anxiety, paranoia, low self-esteem, relapse, relationship problems, sexual fear, sexual compulsion, self-mutilation, borderline personality, irritable bowel, migraine, P.M.S., post traumatic stress, bulimia, anorexia, A.C.O.A., obesity, multiple personality, hallucinations, religious addiction, parenting problems and suicidal feelings.*"

(Italics mine.)

Among this wide range of symptoms are to be found most of the symptoms of schizophrenia which were noted the most frequently by schizophrenics and their family members in a survey of 228 family members and 61 schizophrenics reported in the *Journal of Orthomolecular Psychiatry*<sup>2</sup> fifteen years ago. Compare the italicized symptoms above with the following symptoms of diagnosed schizophrenics: mood swings, panic, depression, anxiety (all were experienced by over three-fourths of the patients); paranoia and hallucinations (experienced by at least a half); suicidal feelings (by a third); substance abuse (by a third); and self mutilation (by a fourth). Other frequently reported symptoms not listed by the California treatment center concerned altered thought processes: inability to concentrate (over three-fourths), confusion (two thirds) and no control over thoughts (over half).

"Delusions", usually included as a major symptom of schizophrenia in the psychiatric literature is not on either list. It was not included in the survey because it is a culturally loaded word. Anthropologists have contributed to the "myth of mental illness" by emphasizing that different cultures have differing beliefs - which may seem insane to members of another culture. Belief about what mental illness is, how it is caused and what should be done about it is an example.

For many talking therapists in the United States, "childhood sexual abuse" has become the "first cause" of choice, joining a long list of prior fad theories of social causation from the "good old days" of psychiatry: "poor potty training"; "emotionally cold mothers"; "smother love" coupled with "rigid fathering"; mixed messages sent by either parent"; "double-binds", to name a few.

Luckily for parents, not all psychologists, social workers, ministers - or other talking therapists, counselors or advisors - have jumped on the "childhood sexual abuse" bandwagon. Professional debates over the nature and reality of repressed memories of sexual abuse have been widely reported and often debated in the popular media since *The Seattle Times*<sup>3</sup> reported in August of 1992 that psychologist Elizabeth Loftus would tell the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association that repressed memories

of sexual abuse might be false and could be suggested by therapists. In a three part series, the *Rocky Mountain News*<sup>4</sup> disclosed ways in which counselors have influenced their clients, some by insisting that those clients who did not remember episodes of childhood sexual abuse must dig deeper into their repressed memories if they hoped to find relief from present distress. "Remembering incest and childhood abuse is the first step in healing" said the 1992 advertisement from the California treatment center.<sup>5</sup>

One acquaintance of mine was told by his counselor, a minister, that people with his (relatively mild) symptoms had usually suffered sexual abuse as children. Since he could not remember any such experience, he was told to question all of the members of his family, which he did. His mother finally pointed out that with all the trauma the man had suffered in his childhood and early teens, there was no need to throw in sexual abuse. The minister accepted this and went on to explore other possibilities - with more positive results, if "getting to the bottom of things" is the objective.

One phone caller on a TV talk show about the repressed memory controversy said that his therapist was so persuasive that if he had not remembered when he actually was assaulted sexually, he would have been convinced that it had been by his father.

If relatively normal adults have a difficult time resisting the persuasion of the counselors they have gone to for relief, how can we expect it of paranoid schizophrenics? The concept of childhood sexual abuse is dramatic and easy to fantasize; it offers both an explanation of the problem and grounds for blaming someone else. Best of all, for those looking for it, it offers a socially acceptable way to "get even".

It was bad enough when parents had to pay psychiatrists only to learn that by their subtle actions, emotions and hidden motivations they had caused their child's illness. This time around, parents are up against a whole phalanx of social fixers playing hardball. While no one ever went to jail for being "schizophrenic", sexual abuse of children is a crime. Parents have been sent to prison for sexually abusing their children on the testimony of individuals no better qualified to judge what really happened (let alone to diagnose, or to

recommend or give treatment) than is the high-handed and irresponsible social worker, the so-called "therapist" whose letter was quoted here.

Mary was justified in being afraid. In his article "When Parents Become Victims"<sup>6</sup> in the April, 1993 *Reader's Digest*, Trevor Armbrister notes that when the charge is child abuse, social workers call the shots and the system does not hold them accountable. Even worse, it is up to the accused parents to prove their innocence rather than the burden of proof being on the accusers.

Tired of wondering what she supposedly had done that could possibly be interpreted as sexual abuse, Mary recently consulted a psychologist who, in turn, tried to contact Eric's therapist. After several weeks, the therapist returned his call to say that he did not have Eric's or his father's permission to divulge this privileged information. The psychologist, indignant at first, later said the social worker is within his rights as a therapist both in writing the letter and then refusing to be specific about the charges. He did reassure Mary that legally she has nothing to worry about at present; if Eric's therapist had real reason to suspect sexual abuse, he was required by law to contact the local Child-Protective agency immediately. The first she would have learned about it would have been when she was contacted by that agency, which then would have taken action. Now Mary must wait out the possibility of a civil suit by Eric who, according to the most recent change in the law, now has six years rather than three from the time he first "remembered" to bring suit.

No matter how well Orthomolecular therapy

is working for them, schizophrenics need friends, they need support. Most also need help in understanding themselves, their limitations and potentials, and many need advice in directing their lives. Schizophrenics Anonymous groups can help, but only to a certain extent. If schizophrenics under treatment are unable to find the needed auxiliary support from their doctors or with aid from the Orthomolecular community, they or their families are likely to look elsewhere. There they may find concepts directly opposed to Orthomolecular beliefs and practices. Given the current social milieu, this may mean not only that Orthomolecular regimens are not followed, but that further emotional damage may be done to both patients and their parents. Recall the days when mothers of schizophrenics were called "schizophrenogenic" in the world outside of Orthomolecular psychiatry and be warned that the witch hunt is on again.

#### References

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