MUNCHHAUSEN SYNDROME
KARL FREDERIC VON MUNCHHAUSEN (1720-1797)
Postal stamps issued on Munchhausen

Sitting on a cannon ball - Czechoslovakia, 1970
Riding on severed horse - West Germany, 1970

Karl Frederic Von Munchhausen (1720-1797) was a minor nobleman, a country gentleman with a large estate. In his youth, he joined the Russian military, where he served until 1750.

On returning home he lived in Badenwerder, Livonia, in his manor. It was here that he acquired an exaggerated great reputation of his witty and clever story telling ability about his war and other adventures, which were largely the product of his own imagination. They were collected, further exaggerated and made into outrageous tall tales and published by Rudolf Raspe, in 1771. Munchhausen was then an embittered and irascible old man, aged 74, who pursued a series of law suits to protect his name, but failed and died of a massive stroke in 1797. Raspe's two volume books tell the Baron's astounding feats. A few examples are mentioned below:

A storm effect and arrival in Ceylon... Attacked by wolf, flogs him, turning it inside out of its skin... Famous horse presented by Court Przobossy, with which he performs extraordinary feats, even when the horse is severed in two parts... Baron and the brass cannon travelling in the moon (stamp); building a bridge from Africa to Great Britain... Baron besieges Seringapatam... Combat between Baron and Tippoo Sahib - and many other spooky tales.

1951, Richard Asher published a paper in th Lancet, entitled Munchhausen's syndrome, describing a patient who simulated physical illness, for the sole purpose of medical attention and treatment, with no other motive. Asher chose this name in honor of the famous Baron. It is a fictitious disorder, in which a person repeatedly acts as if he or she has a physical disorder, when in truth they themselves have fabricated the symptoms. They are even willing to undergo painful and risky surgery, in order to get sympathy and special attention. Patient complains of several dramatic and inconsistent symptoms becoming more severe, once the treatment is begun. Some pointers are: appearance of new symptoms after negative test results, presence of multiple surgical scars, and eagerness for new tests, history of seeking treatment at numerous hospitals, usually with discharge against medical advice.

Munchhausen's by proxy refers to a situation in which parents simulate illness in exaggerate actual illness, or induce illness in a child.

Full article was first printed in April-June (2007) issue of American Journal of Medical Philately - Scalpel & Tong. Abridged format reprinted with the kind permission of the Editor: Dr. Fredrik Swarna

Contributed by
JV Pai-Dhungat*
Professor (Retd.), Dept. of Medicine, TN Medical College & BYL Nair Ch. Hospital, Mumbai 400 008

www.japi.org
© JAPI • VOL. 56 • FEBRUARY 2008