PP-09: A 10-year-old girl with a suicide attempt:are our social services failing?

D. M. A Dahanayake, T. H. R. Samanmalee

Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Introduction: Suicide attempts are rare under 12 years. Family conflict and lack of parental monitoring predict suicidal thoughts and acts in this age group. Data on young children with suicide attempts in Sri Lanka are scarce. This case highlights the role of psychosocial factors in suicide attempts.

Case report: A 10-year-old girl from a socioeconomically disadvantaged suburb was brought to the hospital following a hanging attempt. She needed intensive care for one week. She was unhappy with her mother for bringing a cheap alternative for breakfast and after her mother left for work, leaving her with her father and two younger siblings, she hanged herself.

Her mother is the sole breadwinner, and her father uses heroin. The two school-aged children are not schooled as they lack stable accommodation, their income is low, and their parents have taken minimal effort (both being illiterate). They spend the day watching television without adult supervision. This child looks after her three-year-old brother. They had recently watched a movie where a family had taken their lives by hanging - the mother lacked an understanding that this was inappropriate for children.

On assessment, no features of depression or trauma-related disorders were found. She had average intelligence but could only identify and write a few letters due to inadequate stimulation. There was no previous involvement of social or child protection services despite the children not attending school. A multi-agency case conference with mental health professionals, judicial medical officers, police, education, and child protection officers was held. Psychosocial concerns were discussed and a plan to support the family was formulated. Children were placed with parents under regular supervision of the Department of Probation.

Conclusions: This case reveals how social and family systems coalesced, creating a cascade of events leading to the child's hanging attempt. Early detection and coordinated action by relevant authorities are needed if these unfortunate incidents are to be avoided in the future.

Keywords: psychosocial concerns, suicide attempt, social and family conflict, parental monitoring