

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Pulp Fiction, and the Press

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Recent professional publications show that the diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may be subject to abuse in forensic settings. Now, pulp fiction portrayals of PTSD and reports in the press also reflect how this relatively new diagnostic category can be abused. This trivialization of PTSD has implications for real survivors of truly traumatic events.

There is nothing new in the notion that some people feign illness for financial gain.^{1,2} However, the establishment of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a distinct psychiatric condition has brought with it the expression of renewed concerns. Commentators have cautioned that the symptoms of PTSD are subjective, well publicized, and easy to simulate.^{3,4} Trimble⁵ noted that attorneys might coach their clients in the furtherance of a claim so that "...the counting off of symptoms in checklist fashion will become routine practice in many a lawyer's office." Lees-Haley⁶ considered this potential for abuse and concluded: "If mental illnesses were rated on the New York Stock Exchange, PTSD would be a growth stock to watch."

Recent findings demonstrate that attorneys can play an active role in furthering the presentation of false PTSD claims. Rosen⁷ reported on 20 survivors of a major marine disaster who all filed personal injury claims and presented with the hallmark symptoms of PTSD. The resulting and extraordinarily high incidence rate for diagnosed PTSD among these litigating survivors was explained, in part, by reports of attorney coaching and symptom sharing. Thus, several survivors disclosed that counsel had advised them that they didn't need to work and it might be worth their while to see a doctor every week. Two other survivors reported after settling their cases that attorneys had explained to crew members how people with PTSD had sleep problems, nightmares, and fears. This information was allegedly shared with others in the group.

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Pulp Fiction and the Press

It does not bode well for a relatively new diagnosis when professional findings are mimicked in the story lines of popular

books. In Carl Hiassen's *Strip Tease*,⁸ one of the main characters is the establishment's bouncer, Shad. As the story goes, Shad carefully places a cockroach in a container of yogurt and reseals the package. He then makes contact with an attorney and an argument ensues as to whether counsel should get 33 or 40 percent. Once the fee is settled, Shad states: "Tell me about your ace shrink," to which counsel responds, "A good man. I've used him on other cases. You should start seeing him as soon as possible, and as often as possible." Shad's new counsel continues: "It's important to document your pain and suffering. It will help determine the final damages. . . You might even consider quitting your job. . . Lost income would greatly enhance a jury award. How about taking a leave of absence?" Some 50 pages later, Shad visits the shrink, who inquires whether the roach upset him. "Upset? Hell, I'm traumatized." The following dialogue ensues:

Doctor: Are you having bad dreams?

Shad: Nope.

Doctor: Not even about the roach? Try to remember.

Shad: Ah. . . Now that you mention it, I been havin' fearsome nightmares.

Unfortunately for Shad, the attorney's secretary mistakenly eats the yogurt that has been refrigerated at the counsel's office. Fortunately for Shad, he gets involved in a motor vehicle accident before the book is finished and this motor vehicle accident occurs at the hands of the villainous company's truck. In response to this ironic twist of good fortune, Shad develops chronic anxiety and achieves a hefty settlement.

Falsified claims for trauma fare no better in real life stories portrayed in the press. An article in the *New York Times*⁹ reported that New Jersey's Insurance Department staged 10 accidents around the state and watched the "claims pour in." The article explained how in one incident, "Video cameras inside the bus and outside filmed 17 people scrambling onto the bus before the police arrived. All later claimed to be injured in the accident." The Insurance Department reported seeing in over one-half of the staged accidents, "more than a hundred 'passengers,' doctors and lawyers move in like vultures spotting a corpse."

Discussion

Professional findings, pulp fiction, and reports in the press reflect a common theme that should come as no surprise—some people are willing to falsify claims associated with trauma. Traumatic events can be staged, people can pretend they were present at events when they were not, and symptoms of PTSD can be coached and simulated. Unfortunately, when individuals and their counsel take advantage of these realities, they trivialize the meaning of PTSD and diminish concern for the real-life survivors of significant trauma. The goal of preserving the validity of serious PTSD claims should caution clinicians who conduct evaluations in forensic or disability settings.

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