

CHAPTER 3

THE MENTAL STATUS EXAMINATION IN THE EMERGENCY ROOM

In the fast pace of the Emergency Room, clinicians are challenged to marshal their total store of knowledge to assess, treat, and advocate for their patients. In the Emergency Room, clinicians see mental health patients as well as medical and surgical patients with mental health issues. Because of the emergent aspect of care, clinicians are often called upon to think and act quickly when their patients are in danger.

CASE 1

THE WOMAN WHO WAS STRUCK BY THE WRATH OF GOD

It was the middle of the afternoon at the Emergency Room of an East Coast medical center. A tired-looking Emergency Room nurse met me at the door escorting Mrs. H, an elderly Cuban woman. The nurse declined to enter my office but just pushed the patient through in a wheelchair accompanied by her paperwork. As he left, the nurse called over his shoulder, saying, "This one's crazy."

As soon as she entered my office, Mrs. H began screaming rapidly, "I'm in terrible pain! I've been struck by the wrath of God!" She stood up and paced the floor but she could not quiet herself. Mrs. H tried at one point to sit down but she immediately jumped up again as if struck.

"It has happened again," she roared. "I felt it coming for a week because my body did not feel right and so I knew I was going to be punished."

"Why do you think that God would want to hurt you, Mrs. H?" I enquired gently.

"Last week I got in an argument with my girlfriend and I've been angry ever since. I told her I had thoughts about cheating on my husband. I think she went and told the priest and now God is striking me down! It's a stupid question, anyway. How do I know why God does things? I was punished last night, that's all I know."

"Try to talk slower and tell me exactly what happened," I said, struggling to get a word in.

"I was in my kitchen last night when I saw the Holy Spirit. It looked like a ball of blue electricity. It came in through the window and flew around the kitchen. The light ran down my back and it felt like an electrical shock touching me. My back felt the burning of the fire. And when I looked on my body, I saw the burning mark of the Holy Spirit."

"Are you sure that you are not confused about what happened to you?" I asked.

Mrs. H was incensed. "You're just a doctor," she hissed. "What do you know about the Holy Spirit? Nothing! God has punished *me*, and I can see it and feel the pain of it!"

"Yes, but sometimes people can be confused about complicated things like God," I persisted weakly.

"You're clearly a big idiot," the elderly woman exclaimed, shaking her head in exasperation, "who has no experience with God. This is not the first time this has happened, you know. God punished me like this once before, two years ago. If you doubt my word, it is easy to prove I'm telling the truth. Just look at my back and you will see the mark of the Holy Spirit burned into my flesh!"

I did not believe her story of being marked by God but I was happy to look at her back if only to help build rapport with her. Although I tried to be gentle, she screamed in pain when I barely touched her shoulder. When I gently lifted up the back of her gown, I could not believe what I saw. Running across her back in a distinct straight line was an angry swollen red welt covered by blisters. I had never seen anything like it. All I could think was that she might have been struck by lightning. Or was I really witnessing an act of God?

Mrs. H appeared warm and her body temperature was elevated at 101 degrees Fahrenheit (normal=98.6 degrees).

In her Diagnostic Examination, Mrs. H demonstrated clear psychomotor agitation. She said she had not slept more than a few hours in the last seven days and she had not eaten for the last 10 hours. She said her heart had been pounding, she had been sweating excessively, and her hands were trembling continuously over the last week. Mrs. H agreed that she was irritable and angry but she denied emotions of sadness or elation. Mrs. H acknowledged paranoid thoughts and her thought content was fixed on her story about the Holy Spirit. She denied suicidal or violent thoughts or intentions.

On her Cognitive Examination tests of *attention*, Mrs. H failed a test of Orientation—she knew who she was but she gave the day and date when her episode had first occurred. When I asked her the time, she just shook her head, although there was a clock on the wall and she was wearing a watch. When I asked her *where* she was, she guessed she was in a church. When I asked her to hold up her left hand in a test of Basic Verbal Comprehension, she complied

only half the time, even when I held up my hand as a model. On three occasions, she forgot about the Cognitive Examination altogether and she had to be reminded of what she was doing.

In tests of *language*, Mrs. H's Quality of Speech was poor—her speech was rapid and loud. Mrs. H could only repeat three of the six words read to her in English and Spanish in a test of Verbal Registration and Immediate Repetition. In the Object and Part Naming test, Mrs. H could name a watch, a pen, and a shoe with no problems, but she could not name their parts.

In *memory* tests, test, Mrs. H could only repeat two numbers out of seven on a test of Digit Span (working memory capacity). She failed Category Recall and she could not remember any words in tests of Uncued and Cued Delayed Memory. She declined any further testing.

CHALLENGE

Periodically we are faced with a paranoid patient who may actually be in danger. Clearly, Mrs. H had suffered some kind of severe and painful injury that she associated with her religious beliefs. I concluded that her reality testing was poor and that she was indeed psychotic. Because of her condition, however, it was necessary to elucidate what had really taken place to ensure there was no continuing danger to her health.

Your challenge is to diagnose Mrs. H's problem and to tie it in with her psychiatric picture. Here are some hints: Mrs. H's wounds were not self-induced as a result of religious mortification, personality disorder, or psychosis. She had not been scalded while cooking in her kitchen, nor was she the victim of lightning or home electrical problems.

SOLUTION