Case Report
An Unusual Presentation of Catatonia-Like Behavior: Differentiating Malingering from Catatonia

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Received 16 September 2021; Revised 14 November 2021; Accepted 20 November 2021; Published 29 November 2021

1. Introduction

Malingering, the feigning of psychiatric illness for external gain or avoidance of punishment, has been long recognized in human history and popularized in classical literature. Shakespeare’s Hamlet disguised himself under fits of madness, and Odysseus avoided fighting in the Trojan war by pretending to be mentally ill. In psychiatric studies, malingering has been well described. However, there is a paucity of scientific literature regarding the feigning of catatonia-like symptoms, potentially because catatonic symptoms are less well understood by the public and more difficult to maintain for long periods of time. Catatonia was first described by Karl Kahlbaum in 1874 as a complex and diverse syndrome of motor disturbance with an inability to move normally despite full ability, in an underlying psychiatric or medical disorder [1]. Treatment involves resolving the underlying psychiatric or medical issue, benzodiazepines, and electroconvulsive therapy [2]. Currently, there is little guidance on how to differentiate malingering with catatonia-like behavior from catatonia.

Here, we present a case report of a patient who presented with catatonia-like behaviors that were inconsistent, diverse, and most likely to be volitional. We detail the important features of her presentation, highlight differences between her presentation and catatonia, other differential diagnoses to consider, and the importance of recognizing malingering in such patients to avoid unnecessary treatments and to shift the focus of care to more appropriate patient goals.

2. Case Presentation

The patient was a 45-year-old female who was admitted to an acute psychiatric hospital with depressed mood, suicidal ideation, and auditory hallucinations. She was discharged five days prior from a different hospital, and according to previous records, has been repeatedly hospitalized within the last 12 months totaling 18 emergency department visits. Her psychiatric history was significant for benzodiazepine use disorder, opiate use disorder, borderline personality disorder, and major depressive disorder. Her medications on admission included clonazepam, clonidine, buprenorphine...
The patient’s case was discussed at length with all the attending psychiatrists, case managers, and hospital staff who were involved in her care. A catatonia specialist in the region was also consulted, who confirmed that she was likely to not have catatonia. Repeated administration of lorazepam as challenge tests seemed to have a limited effect on her catatonic and other behaviors and would instead seem to reinforce them. After a protracted hospital stay of two months, the patient was discharged to a shelter with proper social supports and psychiatric follow-up. Two and three months after discharge, the patient represented to two different hospitals at different cities for unusual medical concerns and requests for medications, leaving against medical advice each time, once walking out with a peripheral IV still in hand.

3. Discussion

The most important aspect of this case is the differentiation between malingering and catatonia. Principal features of catatonia include mutism, stupor, negativism, posturing, waxy flexibility, stereotypy, automatic obedience, ambidexterity, echophenomena, and odd mannerisms [1]. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 5th Edition (DSM-5) criteria are used for a diagnosis of catatonia, which includes greater than three of these clinical features [3]. The most sensitive and validated rating scale for catatonia is the Bush-Francis Catatonia Rating Scale [2]. The patient’s Bush-Francis Catatonia Rating Scale wavered each day from 5 to 7, sometimes positive for immobility, grimacing, mutism, posturing, and diaphoresis, yet not in the typical presenting manner of patients with catatonia. As described earlier, malingering involves intentional production of false or grossly exaggerated physical or psychological problems that are motivated by external incentives [3]. The main clues in this case that pointed towards malingering included the presence of known motivating external incentives (benzodiazepines in the context of her substance use disorder, housing, and food), the fluctuating and circumstantial changes to her behavior, and inconsistency with any known psychiatric disorder. Furthermore, she was unresponsive to lorazepam challenge tests. Most importantly, these observations were made and confirmed by multiple staff members, case managers, and attending psychiatrists and discussed at length in team meetings.

Other differential diagnoses considered included major depressive disorder (MDD) with catatonia, schizophreniform disorder with catatonia, conversion disorder, and factitious disorder. Although the patient was previously diagnosed with MDD, psychotic features and catatonia-like behaviors were new in her medical record, less likely to be part of her long-standing MDD diagnosis, and inconsistent with her volitional behavior. Schizophreniform disorder was considered given her presentation of new positive and negative psychotic symptoms but is unusual to have an onset at her age, and her symptoms were unlike typical presentations. Conversion disorder with catatonia has been described before in the literature, but the patient had no acute stressor, and appeared to be volitional in her behavior. Factitious disorder imposed on self could be considered especially in
consideration of her repeated hospitalizations, but the patient did not seem interested in assuming the sick role, consistently showing displeasure with the care team if her demands were not met. As opposed to factitious disorder in which symptoms are feigned to assume the sick role, patients who malinger seek to avoid difficult situations or gain external rewards [4]. Ultimately, the patient was diagnosed with malingering complicated by her existing psychiatric illnesses. Most of her behavior was thought to be purposeful and in service of acquiring benzodiazepines, housing, and food.

To the best of our knowledge, only one other case report in the literature has reported a patient who appeared to have feigned catatonia-like behavior in what was thought to be factitious disorder [5]. That patient presented with mutism, stupor, negativism, and withdrawn behavior, and staff noticed that she had episodes of spontaneous purposeful movement when not under direct supervision. Other case studies have discussed catatonia in association with conversion disorder, but not with purposeful feigning of catatonia [6–8]. Catatonia is difficult to mangle, and extended observation during hospitalization will usually reveal the patient to have inconsistencies in their behaviors [9].

Malingering is a difficult diagnosis for physicians to make given the clinical uncertainty of an unusual presentation, potential harm to the patient with a wrong diagnosis, fear of malpractice, and damage to the trust of the patient–doctor relationship. However, continued medical treatment for feigned symptoms also has its risks. Benzodiazepines were administered to our patient without noticeable effect. Were this patient still presumed to have intractable catatonia, the next step would involve electroconvulsive therapy. However, this more invasive procedure would inflict unnecessary side effects that would be of no benefit in the case of malingering. The treatment would not address her issues of multiple psychiatric illnesses including major depressive disorder and benzodiazepine use disorder, as well as her lack of resources such as food, social supports, and shelter. Instead, we stress that the diagnosis of malingering must be made to shift strategies from medical management to goals around social support services and targeted treatment of other psychiatric issues. This case report adds to the limited existing literature on volitional feigning of catatonia and highlights the need of physicians to accurately distinguish malingering from catatonia, which ultimately leads to better care for the patient.

Data Availability

The patient data used to support the findings of this study have not been made available because of the need to protect patient privacy.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors do not have any conflicts of interest to declare.

Acknowledgments

Andy Wang was supported by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences, National Institutes of Health, Award number TL1TR002546. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the NIH.

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