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Changing Shaken Baby Syndrome to Abusive Head Trauma

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Jean Robinson considers the politics behind the name

The American Academy of Pediatrics wants doctors to stop using the term Shaken Baby Syndrome in favour of what they are trying to present as 'something more scientific'. In other words, Shaken Baby Syndrome is becoming so discredited that they now have to think of a more acceptable term.

The naming and re-naming of diseases - or even classifying them as diseases - is a highly political act, and there is a long history of this in women's psychiatry. Examples of re-named conditions are myalgic encephalomyelitis which became chronic fatigue syndrome; Munchausen syndrome by proxy (MSBP) became Factitious and Induced Illness. Both these changes served a purpose. By removing the name ME it made it sound less like a 'real' disease and the public could be persuaded it was just bad 'fatigue', which everyone has from time to time. This was greatly to the benefit of the insurance companies, who have fought for it tooth and nail. MSBP had become greatly discredited, to the embarrassment of the paediatricians, so it too got a new fancy name.

As for Shaken Baby Syndrome - no-one has ever seen these babies being shaken, and I went to an extremely impressive lecture by an American doctor who had also done bio-engineering, who proved it was impossible by shaking a baby to generate the force to cause such damage. So now they just say the baby was injured by someone, but don't suggest any method. How long will it be before all head trauma will become viewed as Abusive Head Trauma?