

Sociodemographic characteristics and psychopathological assessment in 13 paediatric patients with functional neurological disorders: a preliminary report

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Introduction: Functional neurological disorders (FND) are characterized by neurological symptoms that cannot be explained by typical neurological diseases or other medical conditions [1]. In the recent years, there has been a growing interest in FND in the paediatric age, whose prevalence and clinical manifestations are similar to the ones found in the adult population [2-3].

Objectives: To characterize, from a socio-demographic and psychopathological perspective, a sample of children diagnosed with FND.

Methods: Thirteen patients below 18 years old with FND, hospitalized at “Carlo Besta” Neurological Institute in Milan, completed a battery of anamnestic and neuropsychological tests, assessing: socio-demographic status, cognitive level, behavioural and emotional issues, depression, and anxiety. In adolescents, also alexithymic traits and dissociative symptoms were evaluated. Patients’ parents completed the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL).

Results: Five patients presented movement disorders (tremor, myoclonus, gait disorder), three patients psychogenic non-epileptic seizures, and five patients sensitivity disturbances (pain, anaesthesia, paresthesia). Cognitive profile was normal in 11 patients; academic performance was good in 9 patients, whilst 3 had a diagnosis of Specific Learning Difficulty (SLD) and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Precipitating events were found in 11 patients. At the self-report questionnaires, mean scores close to the clinical cut-off were documented with respect to affective and somatic problems. At the parent-report questionnaires, clinically significant mean scores were observed in the CBCL subscales assessing anxious-depressive symptoms and somatic complaints.

Conclusions: Demographic and anamnestic features of our sample were in line with the literature. Data about academic performance suggest that a screening for SLD or ADHD might be indicated for FND patients with concomitant school difficulties. With respect to the psychometric assessment, we might speculate that children with FND, although acknowledging the relevance of somatic symptoms, have difficulties in recognizing some internal emotional states (which, conversely, are easily recognized by their parents).

References

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