

Understanding Parental Alienation as an Index Term in ICD-11

Learn about WHO's inclusion of "parental alienation"

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ON MAY 25, 2019 THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION'S ASSEMBLY adopted the final version of the *International Classification of Diseases*, 11th Edition, which will go into

effect for general use on January 1, 2022. (In the intervening months, WHO Member States will be planning about how to use the new version, prepare translations, and train health professionals.)

For the first time, ICD-11 contains "parental alienation" as a term in its general index. There has been a wide range of interpretation about what the inclusion of the term means regarding WHO's understanding and acceptance of "parental alienation" as a behavioral health diagnosis. We want to set readers straight about this development and the history behind it.



A Brief History

In 2016, a small group of professionals concerned about the importance of parental alienation approached personnel at the World Health Organization who were involved in the process of revising ICD-10. They asked WHO staff about including parental alienation as a diagnosis in ICD-11, and WHO encouraged them to submit a written proposal.

Sometime after this proposal was submitted, WHO launched a beta draft of ICD-11 online, encouraging any interested parties to participate in the process of refining its content. Several members of Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) registered to participate. By this point, it became clear that parental alienation would not become a separate diagnosis in ICD-11, but it seemed possible that it could be in the text of ICD-11 in some other way.

In response to a proposal from Dr. William Bernet about alternative ways to include parental alienation in ICD-11, WHO staff partly implemented his recommendations. They officially included "parental alienation" and "parental estrangement" as "narrower terms" of the already established diagnosis of "caregiver-child relationship problem." This means that alienation and estrangement became "index terms." In other words, when a person searches the index of ICD-11 to find out about "parental alienation" or "parental estrangement," they will find each of those terms and will then be referred automatically to the page describing "caregiver-child relationship problem."

On June 18, 2018, the final version of ICD-11 was adopted and posted on the ICD-11 website, with the term "parental alienation" in its index. At that point, it seemed correct to say, "PA is considered another name for caregiver-child relationship problem."

Between June 2018 and May 2019, it was possible for any interested party to register on the ICD-11 website and post comments and suggestions regarding the text of the final version of ICD-11. Apparently, WHO personnel continued to consider revisions in the final version, based on comments from clinicians, researchers and the general public. Over the next few months, the ICD-11 website was flooded with comments for and against the inclusion of parental alienation in the index of ICD-11. PASG members participated in this effort to include PA. There also was a way for readers to "vote" for or against comments that had been posted. In general, there were many more "votes" in favor of parental alienation than against parental alienation.

Perhaps the most provocative comment against the inclusion of parental alienation in ICD-11 was called "Collective Memo of Concern to: World Health Organization." This document, which was prepared by a number of long-time detractors of parental alienation, contains many misstatements regarding the topic of parental alienation.

Correct Understanding

A few writers complained that some individuals who endorse the concept of parental alienation had been saying that WHO had officially endorsed parental alienation theory by including PA as an index term in ICD-11. In response, WHO has provided this caution: “Index entries serve to be able to code, in case such term is reported. Index entries can in no way be interpreted and must not be interpreted as an endorsement or consideration of endorsement of the underlying concepts” (Team WHO, April 16, 2019).

Status of “Parental Alienation” as an Index Term

Although the final version of ICD-11 was approved by the World Health Organization Assembly, it seems likely that changes may still be made in future years. As additional diseases are identified or additional knowledge is gained about medical conditions, presumably there will be mechanisms to gradually update ICD-11. Thus, it is possible that both advocates and detractors of parental alienation will continue to submit their opinions to ICD-11 staff for their consideration.

Using ICD-11

The announcement on May 25, 2019 is found at:

<https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/25-05-2019-world-health-assembly-update>.

There are two versions of ICD-11 available on the Internet. The “browser” version of ICD-11 is where medical professionals, individuals who code diagnoses, and the general public will go when looking for a term. The URL for the browser version is: <https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en>. If you go to that home page of the browser, you can search for “alienation” and you will be taken to the diagnosis “caregiver-child relationship problem.” Note that at the top of the browser page it says Version April 2019, which is the current version. The browser version is also called the “blue” ICD-11.

The general public also can go to the “orange version” of ICD-11, which contains additional detail. The URL for “caregiver-child relationship problem” in the orange version is: <https://icd.who.int/dev11/l-m/en#/http://id.who.int/icd/entity/547677013>. Here you will find that “parental alienation” and “parental estrangement” are listed as “index terms” for “caregiver-child relationship problem.” This simply means that those terms are recognized when a user searches for them in ICD-11, and those terms automatically take the reader to “caregiver-child relationship problem.”

If you have any questions about the inclusion of “parental alienation” as an index term in ICD-11, please contact PASG for clarification at drjudithpilla@comcast.net.

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