

Faulty Medication

Brian Tajlili, FSA, MAAA

Fiona started acting strange the week after our return from the woods of northern Minnesota to escape the Carolina heat. Her hostility toward PJ in the closing days of summer break had been frantic, slamming doors in his face so hard the family photos tumbled from the wall. When we found his Panthers jersey charred and hanging from the basketball goal, should we have been more concerned? Maybe? I mean, it had been another terrible season.

Ok, but after a decade of parenting two kids, chaos was a constant. The only constant. Plus, PJ, since the day he was born, made it his life's mission to torment the *bejeezus* out of his older sister. Girl had a long fuse, but when it went off—boom! Our daughter might be five-foot-nothing but was an atomic bomb of ferocity and PJ had been on the wrong end of it more than a few times.

It honestly didn't hit us that this was a different sort of rage until the soccer game. Yes, *that* soccer game. The one where the defender had two years and nine inches on our girl and after twenty minutes of contentious play, Fiona just snapped, kicked her opponent in the kneecap, pulled her braids, and while tussling on the pitch between growls of profanity, sunk her canines, braces and all, into the poor girl's thigh. Pandemonium!

Red cards went flying, coaches and parents yowled with disgust, and we fled the scene before the referee could even tell us we were banned for the season.

When we pressed Fiona for an explanation, she was oddly silent until she began sobbing, “I dunno, I dunno, I didn’t mean to, I couldn’t stop!” Already knowing the punishment, she threw her phone on the couch in my direction and stomped off to her room.

“Malcolm, this is a god-awful start to high school,” Cath had been breaking out in hives the past few days. If motherhood was a video game, Fiona’s teenage years had been the level that nearly sent my wife to hurl the console in the dumpster. She had taken Cath’s stress to the next echelon, and the soccer incident was another new frontier.

Cath had made an appointment with our pediatrician, with hopes of getting a referral to a counselor or psychologist. “You don’t think it’s—I mean I’ve been reading—”

“You’re reading too much.” Every night at 2 AM, for a quick moment before dozing off again I could see that ghostly glow from her corner of the bed, my wife’s stone face shining like a wraith in the night.

Cath had a nasty and unbreakable habit of nocturnal doom-scrolling, much like I did before a drip of Somnalazadone™ knocked me out until dawn.

Ah, Somnalazadone™, the good stuff.

Admittedly, Cath's thought had crossed my mind too. We'd just been camping near the Canadian border. We'd read the reports of *C. darangium* coming from places like Yellowknife first, then Winnipeg and Saskatoon, where they called it Mad Moose disease. Some tick-borne illness that was making certain kids go crazy, violent, reducing them to infantile or barbaric states. Rumor was it had been going around Siberia in secret for years.

Before all that, scientists had been warning about what would get released when the permafrost thawed. We had hoped the worst was behind us, when we made it through the quarantined summer of mammoth-pox unscathed, binge-watching the eleven different streaming subscriptions we'd forgotten to cancel. Too hot to go outside anyway—and always even hotter than the year before.

My dad had witnessed the whole soccer debacle unfold in person and was never shy in sharing his opinions. "Teenage girl hormones—I told you one day you'd feel the pain!" he grumbled.

"Dad, this isn't normal hormonal stuff. She took a legit bite out of another girl! And did you see the bloodshot in her eyes?"

"Well if you're that worried, I got someone who can help. I mean these Medicare Super Plus benefits—amazing!" Dad was always going on about his souped-up insurance, bragging it was triple diamond rated.

We, on the other hand, were not quite so fortunate. Our companies both cut down to the most basic health insurance allowed, as many did, in the last recession—too much risk with the explosion of gene therapies and new infectious diseases. If Fiona’s condition was something more than teen anxiety, the only pediatric psychiatrists or neurologists in-network were a hundred miles away.

We went to our regular pediatrician for a referral. Fiona jittered and itched at her palms in the waiting room. “Am I in trouble, dad?” Despite her recent, sporadic outbursts, she was still the same innocent, freckle-faced kid in my eyes. The same gawky black-haired girl with flighty energy, who liked to dance, draw pictures of unicorns, climb the oak trees down by the creek barefoot.

“No, we’re going to get you help, we promise.”

“This isn’t that Mad Moose disease? Some girl in Quebec straight up drove her parent’s van into an ATM machine. The whole thing was on TikTok. What if it happens to me? I don’t want to hurt anyone again!” A tear crawled down the side of her cheek. “I hated middle school, Dad, and I was so looking forward to this year—and now this! Why?” My eyes welled up and I almost choked on my saliva. The only thing I could do was give her a long hug and kiss the top of her head.

The doctor took some lab work and when she called a few days later, our fears were confirmed. She had c. darangium in her blood.

“I’m going to write you a script for some Droxxlaprone™. We haven’t seen cases around here yet, so I can’t speak for this first-hand, but they’ve seen good results from that up in Canada.”

“How long is the treatment, is she going to be able to go to school, play soccer?”

“Are you sitting down, Mr. McPhee?” I braced myself for what I was about to hear. “This is going to be a tough treatment for Fiona. She won’t want to get out of bed while she’s on this—and she may need to be until March. The first month is the hardest, but if you stick with it—you won’t have to worry about longer term effects.”

The first month? I felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer to my gut. “With all the modern medicine we have, is this the best we can do?”

The doctor paused. “Well, you can’t chance that she won’t have another incident. What if it happens at school, to another kid? But this is a new disease—I hear about some new experimental treatments out there, but I don’t know much about them yet and I say this for sure—your health plan isn’t going to cover them.” Uplifting. The only reassuring news we received was that ticks were the only mode of transmission.

A few hours after Fiona's first dose of Droxx, she settled into a peaceful and long sleep. When she woke up, her eyes were glassy, her speech slurred. Drool escaped her lips like she was in a paralytic state.

Even PJ was rattled, after days of torturing Fiona with chants of "mad moose, sad goose!" he missed his older sister. "Is she just going to lay here like this forever?"

On the third day, while holding a water bottle of chicken broth close to her lips so she could drink from a straw, Fiona motioned to her phone. It had been blowing up with texts from her friends. I figured she just wanted to watch her TikTube videos, but a few minutes later my phone lit up with a message. It was from Fiona.

I feellike im in a baddream the 1 wher u can see hear but cant kick or scream .. i wanna scream

I called Cath over and we just looked at each other in horror. What were we to do? I wanted to throw the bottle of Droxx pills down the toilet, but I settled for giving her a break from her next dose. We were taking the risk, yes.

One dose skipped turned into two and Fiona was back to talking and eating real food. And by the second day, she was alive again and giddy. When she emerged from her room she gave PJ a giant hug, "did you miss me bro? I missed you!" He smirked, but I could tell that he *did*. That

night dinner was tense. We all waited for some trigger—something to send Fiona into a frenzied spiral, but it never came. Thankfully.

“Mom, dad—I’m totally fine! Like so much better than when I was on the Droxx. Ugh that stuff was terrible.”

“So, you don’t feel like hurting yourself or others?”

“No, why would I want to do that?” Cath and I looked at each other and looked at PJ. PJ shifted his eyes and then poked Fiona in the side. “Stop, that tickles,” she poked PJ back smiling. Ok, maybe we were in the clear?

“So can I go back to school on Monday?”

Maybe we’re terrible parents. Maybe we’re simply terrible people. Likely both—because we never told anyone at school about the c. derangium. Just that Fiona was sick and might need a long break from school. Maybe that break would be a week, maybe it would be her whole freshman year. She was banned from travel soccer, but she was missing sports bad. On Monday, Fiona told us she signed up for cross-country.

“So now you’re going to run? You always complained when the coaches made you run at soccer practice.”

“So—on TikTube I saw running helps cure Mad Moose. Plus, my besties are doing it and they say it’s fun!”

Cath and I were skeptical but decided to roll the dice. That evening, the family enjoyed a giant bowl of spaghetti and meatballs. I even skipped the Somnalazdone™ before drifting off to sleep. All felt right in the world again.

At 2 AM I awoke to Cath snoring and snatched my phone, finding the usual gloomy news about politics, the economy, another endangered species gone extinct. Nothing caught my eyes until I saw a headline about a flight grounded in Ottawa. Some six-year-old tried to hijack the snack tray and mauled an attendant.

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Fiona’s venture into cross-country started as a resounding success. She was leading the team in all the workouts. No indication of strange behavior. No calls from the principal’s office. “She’s a little excitable,” the guidance counselor said, “but she seems like a happy, healthy young lady.”

We picked up my dad at his condo and then assembled to watch Fiona’s first meet. She braided her hair tight and bounced with skittish energy at the start. When the gun fired, she took off

like a missile, to the front of the pack. Cath bit her nails, anxiously, scratching at her palms. “I’ve never seen her run like this. Do you think she can keep it up?”

Keep it up, she did! She hit two miles in twelve minutes, her cheeks glowing, fists pumping. I caught her eyes, and she was locked in on the only girl ahead of her—a senior who had finished All-State the year prior. The crowd was mystified—who was this stealthy, ninety-pound freshman giving her the race of her life? “That’s my grandbaby!” dad crowed.

“It’s the Mad Moose!” PJ shouted and Cath shushed him.

With a quarter mile left, Fiona trailed the leader rounding the lake. Her friends chanted; her coaches waved their arms frantically. I caught Fiona’s eyes colored in bloodshot rage. Oh no.

She snarled her teeth and edged up behind the girl. The girl’s elbow grazed Fiona’s shoulder. Then, I saw the glint and then the horror as she knocked her entire weight into the leader, sending both girls tumbling into the lake. But only one stood back up. Fiona bounced to her feet, shook off like a wet, rabid dog, and sprinted across the finish line in a course record, howling as the other girl lay whimpering, muddy, and clutching her knee.

Amidst the shocked silence, a voice yelled out, “Droxx that crazy girl!” By that point, Fiona was out of earshot. She didn’t stop running until she reached our van.

Dad grabbed my shoulder, “I got a guy for this.”

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We had always referred to Dr. Weigenraber as the witch doctor. He was also an out-of-network witch doctor unless you were Medicare triple-diamond, but Dad offered to foot the bill. He had been seeing him for various ailments for a decade, from acupuncture to hypnosis to sciatica therapy. “Dr. Weig” seemed to have the cure for everything.

Cath raised a fuss, “I don’t trust that man with my daughter! Is he even a licensed doctor?” But we were out of options—and we just wanted Fiona to live a normal fourteen-year-old life, not laying comatose in bed, not as a crazed lunatic.

“Ah, Mad Moose eh?” Dr. Weig looked into Fiona’s tonsils and ears. “Is very bad!” he said with a strong accent.

“Yah, it sucks,” Fiona grunted.

“I call my brother in Vallaslava. He is renowned doctor of infectious disease and done much research on c. derangium.” He began scribbling furiously on a piece of paper. “Algandaf Lukezs!”

“Bless you,” I responded.

“No no, see here.” He handed me a paper and in barely legible handwriting, I saw the prescriptions. Two doses a day for three weeks of Algandaflukezs™. “But you see, you do not find this at your normal pharmacy! I must special order.”

“Will insurance cover it? How much will it cost?” Cath, always the rational and practical one, asked.

“Zee insurance? In my home country, no such thing for healthcare. For fire, yes! For health of children, no! Is your daughter, correct? You do anything for her?”

I gave Cath a side-eye. There were two separate questions at hand here—yes, we’d do anything but there was the practical reality of what we could afford. In the last few years, we never could be quite sure what bills would show up and devour months of savings, or what spike-strips would lay in the way of our treatment.

“Trust Dr. Weig. Without me your father does not win 80-year-old plus age group in pickleball championship.”

A few days later, sure enough, our insurance company called. We were talking to someone who said they were a case manager.

“So your plan will cover Droxxlaprone™ at the generic tier—it will be \$3.99 after coinsurance. But this medicine, Algandaflukeys™ is still being reviewed by our actuaries and pharmacy team, and for now it’s off the formulary.”

I was aghast. “What do you want us to do? My daughter is living a nightmare on that stuff.”

“We understand your situation, but you’re going to have to pay the tier six copay plus the penalty.”

“And how much is that?”

“Mr. McPhee, this is going to be a really expensive treatment for your family. \$278,000 is full retail, but after manufacturer rebates and discounts, we can get it for \$167,985.”

I hung up the phone and took a long, long walk around the neighborhood. I could get a contract coding gig at night. We could pay the minimums on our credit card bills. Suspend making any college contributions. Anything that far in the future was a problem for another day. Worst case, we could sell the house and rent at the apartments down the road.

I stayed up late to read, and the more I learned, the more I realized we weren’t alone. Maybe if we could just hold on a bit longer, some other breakthrough would be made. A case of c. derangium was just found in New Hampshire—a nine-year boy jumped out of his bedroom

window and was still missing in the woods. There was a case in California, where an entranced girl injured a koala at the San Diego Zoo. An entire middle school was shut down near Duluth when a gang of delirious seventh graders seized control of the cafeteria and flooded the kitchen with tater-tot grease, though it later turned out that was a hoax to get TikTok views.

Adults, the article said, seemed to escape relatively unscathed, with nothing more than hives and general itchiness. For children and young teenagers with a particular gene expression, however, the disease created unpredictable and violent behavior. The only treatment regularly covered by insurance, Droxxlaprone™ typically resulted in a vegetative state for several months, requiring intense physical therapy and recovery after. Meanwhile the only common side effect noted on Algandaflukeys™ was occasional loss of balance and a euphoric attraction to brightness.

Regardless, we were out of time to weigh our decisions. Cath and I both took drips of Somnalazdone™ before getting in bed and I was back on my Clozesterone™ for anxiety.

The next morning, we heard a crash and a shriek from the kids' bathroom. PJ came flying down the hallway in his pajamas with a look of terror in his eyes, and Fiona was in pursuit wielding one of his baseball bats. I seized the bat and Cath tried to grab Fiona, and she was clawing and gnashing her teeth. PJ raced out the back door and straight into the woods, barefoot. We stuck an emergency syringe of Droxx into her arm and then the dogs and I went out to look for PJ.

I found him scratched to bits, dirty, bleeding, with briars stuck to his flannel pants. His teeth chattered and before I could get two words in, he was pleading, "I did nun-nun-nothing. I mean, I just crossed my eyes at her, and she went raving mad."

I skipped my usual coffee and gave Dr. Weig a call.

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"I hate needles," Fiona clutched my hand while Dr. Weig pulled out a menacing syringe. "Now this could make you a wibbly-wobbly but is temporary." Fiona flinched as he injected her arm. "And bright lights will be amazing!"

We sat in silence on the ride home. Cath nestled in the backseat with Fiona, who rested her head on her mother's lap, until she stirred and broke the quiet.

"You're not really going to sell the house, are you?"

"No dear, don't worry about that sort of thing. It's all gonna be ok."

"Good, cause if I have to share a room with PJ at an apartment, I might kill him even if I don't have Mad Moose."

Fiona may have been joking, but mortal peril had already scarred PJ. When we came home, he had taken residence in the backyard.

“You have a good setup here, kid,” I looked at the tent, the tarp, he was sitting in a fold out chair doing his math homework with a box of Goldfish beside him. The dogs loafed on his sleeping bag.

“I’m testing my survival skills. You know—in case there’s a zombie apocalypse and all.”

“Just please put on good bug spray,” I reminded.

Cath was highly displeased, but too exhausted to argue.

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Other than all the extra hours I’d been working, the next week went well. Fiona finished her second week of treatment. The cross-country coach let her back on the team after hearing about her bout with *c. derangium*. Fiona was bummed she lost her running super-power but still finished third out of the freshmen on the team despite stumbling in the last mile.

With all the press around Mad Moose—a ransacked ice cream parlor in Colorado, a destroyed bounce house center in Connecticut, and a middle school football game in Montana where a

linebacker injured half the offensive line the first play of the game—the insurance company was able to get bulk pricing on Algandaflukezs™. I guess their actuaries did a study showing the potential costs from prolonged use of Droxx, not to mention the consequences of having their policyholders' children missing school and drooling in bed all day. It *only* cost us a 20% coinsurance up to our out-of-pocket maximum, which we'd almost already hit anyway due our various ailments.

I could feel the darkness lifting. Somewhat.

Or so I thought, until I caught the smell of smoke and saw a blaze of fire from the window. Our garage.

I stepped outside to hear a tribal shouting and wailing, while the dogs moaned and yipped with terror. PJ was waving a torch of flames, wearing nothing but his charred Panthers jersey and a pair of boxers. A gasoline canister had ignited, and the van was about to go up in an inferno. I tackled PJ while Cath tried extinguishing the fire before giving up. "It's gonna all blow, Cath. Run!"

We escaped to the edge of the driveway just in time.

"Wait, where is Fiona?"

I raised my head from the ground to see her sitting safely on the branch of an oak tree, her glinting eyes reflecting the fire. In a soft, melodic voice I heard her sing, “PJ is a mad moose, sad goose.” She appeared to be in ecstasy—a silent, peaceful rapture—as the van raged with flames and the pulsing sound of firetrucks wailed through the valley.