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EDITORIAL ARTICLE

Arson and forensic psychiatry☆

Conducta incendiaria y psiquiatría forense

Alexandre Xifró[a,b,*], Esperanza L. Gómez-Durán[c,d,e], Eneko Barbería[f,g], Carles Martin-Fumadó[a,d]

[a] *Institut de Medicina Legal i Ciències Forenses de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain*
[b] *Facultat de Medicina i Ciències de la Salut, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain*
[c] *Servei de Responsabilitat Professional, Col·legi Oficial de Metges de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain*
[d] *Departament de Medicina, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain*
[e] *Hestia Duran i Reynals, Hestia Alliance, Barcelona, Spain*
[f] *Institut de Medicina Legal i Ciències Forenses de Catalunya, Tarragona, Spain*
[g] *Facultat de Medicina i Ciències de la Salut, Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Reus, Tarragona, Spain*

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The current issue of *REVISTA ESPAÑOLA DE MEDICINA LEGAL* includes the original article ''Mental disorders and criminal responsibility in arsonists'', by Dresdner Cid and Folino, which describes an extensive series of people accused of arson.[1] It is specifically based on the forensic psychiatric study of the 197 people accused of this crime and examined in the Adult Psychiatry Unit of the Legal Medical Service in Chile during the period 1999–2012. This series is of great interest due to its sample size and the homogeneity of the assessment and the fact that the authors classify into 5 groups according to the motivation for the crime committed: affective, psychopathological, criminal, ideological or imprudence. This classification extends the well-known distinction between affective and instrumental, which is relevant in the forensic psychiatric or psychological study of violent behaviour.[2] It should be noted that aetiological classification continues to be one of the current focuses of interest in the area of firesetting behaviour[3] and that since the pioneering work of Lewis and Yarnell (1951),[4] it has given rise to numerous reflections, including the integration of theories, typologies and the existing research into a model called ''multi-trajectory theory of adult firesetting'' (MTTAF). This model classifies five prototypical trajectories leading to firesetting behaviour: interest in fires, antisocial cognition, grievance or grievance reaction, need for recognition/emotional expression, and a multifaceted trajectory of offenders with serious and complex problems.[5] The MTTAF recognises factors related to the interest in fire but also includes those who use it as an expression of rage or to conceal other crimes. It considers both distal and proximal causes of behaviour (e.g. personality and life history versus immediate or recent life stressors) and has made it possible to develop standardised assessment and treatment models.[5]

Taking the results of the Dresdner Cid and Folino study,[1] the high frequency of Axis I diagnoses (DSM-IV-TR)—only 14.2% of the series not diagnosed—contrasts with the relatively low rate of psychopathological motivation (only 28%, compared to 43% with affective motivation). This is related to the distribution by pathology, because although 18.3% of the series had a psychotic disorder, substance-related disorders predominated (alcohol intoxication in 32.3%, alcohol or other substance abuse in 8.8%) and a high rate of Axis

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: alexandre.xifro@xij.gencat.cat (A. Xifró).

II disorders was found (54.3% of the series with personality disorder and 9.1% with intellectual disability). When looking for recidivism, 1.5% of the cases examined had a criminal record of arson. They also report that in their series, culpability was considered intact in 52.3% of those examined, with lack of criminal liability found in 24.4% and reduced liability in 23.4% of all those evaluated. The authors correctly discuss the differences between their findings and those generally described in Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian series (of significantly smaller sample sizes), the value of their contribution in relation to common ideas about the characteristics of people who set fires and the differences with the findings of other Latin American studies on the criminal liability predicament.

It should be remembered that firesetting behaviour is of specific interest from the criminal and penal point of view due to the seriousness of the damage and threat that can be involved. This is reflected in the high penalties associated with the corresponding offences; for example, in Spain, basic firesetting carries a prison sentence of 10–20 years according to article 351 of the Penal Code. However, interest by forensic psychiatry, which dates back to the nineteenth century and nowadays continues with specific chapters in reference books and an endless development of assessment tools[6,7] does not only derive from the seriousness of the damage and threat. Nor is it linked exclusively to the diagnosis of pyromania, currently included in the DSM-5 chapter on Disruptive, Impulse-Control, and Conduct Disorders, whose characteristic behavioural pattern is the setting of fires, since this is rarely observed in series, an unexpected finding also in the Dresdner Cid and Folino study.[1] The importance given in forensic psychiatry comes more from the recognition that a significant proportion of those who engage in firesetting behaviour have some type of mental disorder and that the assessment and care of these people is a diagnostic, therapeutic and expert challenge.[6–8] Firesetting behaviour has also been widely described as a risk factor or indicator, from the classic MacDonald triad[9] to more current contributions focusing on prediction and prognosis,[10,11] and there is a need for more in-depth knowledge of the characteristics and needs of these cases in order to improve the care provided to them.[12,13]

In short, the aforementioned original article is not only a relevant contribution in itself, but also because it addresses a field in which the literature of Spanish or Latin American origin is scarce to date and mainly focuses on the serious problem of forest fires.[14,15]

Lastly, as we pointed out in an earlier editorial,[16] the activity figures for the online version of the journal surpassed the milestone of 100,000 visits for the first time in 2015. Of these, about 60% came from Latin American countries, and with the publication of the Dresdner Cid and Folino study,[1] *REVISTA ESPAÑOLA DE MEDICINA LEGAL* once again reinforces its commitment to the dissemination of scientific contributions originating from that area.

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