Definitions of sleeplessness in children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): implications for mothers' mental state, daytime sleepiness and sleep-related cognitions

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Background
Sleep disturbances are common in children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Sleeplessness is frequently reported although results are inconsistent perhaps because different definitions for it are applied. This study looked at maternal functioning and child objective sleep patterns in relation to different definitions of sleeplessness in children with ADHD.

Methods
The study included 45 children (aged 3–14 years) with ADHD and their mothers. Sleeplessness was defined according to: (i) yes/no report of whether mothers thought their children had a problem with sleeplessness (Maternal definition MD) and (ii) mothers' responses to a quantitative standardized questionnaire (Quantitative definition QD) designed to detect the frequency and duration of parent-reported problems with settling, night waking and early waking. Objective sleep patterns were also assessed by means of actigraphy. Maternal mental health, daytime sleepiness and cognitions related to child sleep were assessed by questionnaire.

Results
Both definitions appeared to tap similar although slightly different constructs. There were no group differences in objective sleep patterns. Maternal mental health was found to be significantly worse in the mothers who considered their child to be sleepless (MD) (P < 0.025), but not in those mothers whose child was found to be sleepless according to the standardized criteria (QD). Maternal sleepiness did not differ between groups. For both categories of sleepless children (MD and QD), the mothers had significantly more doubts about their competency as a parent (P < 0.01 and P < 0.025, respectively) compared to mothers of children without sleeplessness.

Conclusions
Two different maternal assessments of child sleeplessness in children with ADHD may assess subtly different constructs, but both may provide useful information about potential problems across the family.