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NEW SYNDROME? OR MORE SILLINESS?

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Mainstream medicine has a name for it: hogwash. But to a small army of lawyers, doctors, and reporters, multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) is a vicious epidemic, "the ultimate 20th century illness." And because of that small army, it needs to be taken seriously, even if you are convinced it's hogwash.

If MCS advocates get their way, perfume and cologne will be banned in public buildings, insecticide spraying will be severely limited, and litigation will break the back of many a corporation. In just one suit, a jury awarded \$49.2 million in compensatory and punitive damages to 32 people who lived near a chemical plant in Missouri.

Roughly speaking, MCS is said to be an immune system or nervous system dysfunction resulting from an overload of offending agents. Often a single agent is blamed as the proverbial back-breaking straw.

Many sufferers claim it's ruined their lives. They say they can't wear colored clothing, eat many of their favorite foods, live in normal houses. One lady even hangs her mail on a clothesline for two weeks to allow it to "detoxify" before she can read it.

What are the symptoms of MCS? Practically everything.

A paper provided by the Chemical Injury Information Network lists over 100 symptoms which may result from MCS, including sneezing, itching, twitching, numbness, difficulty swallowing, hoarseness, ear ache, chest pain, easy bruising, high or low blood pressure, sore muscles, cramps, eczema, "heavy eyes," blurred vision, dyslexia, frequent urination, genital itching, PMS, lower back ache, nausea, belching, constipation, hunger, thirst, headaches, apathy, forgetfulness, insomnia, drop in IQ, depression, bitter or sweet slime in mouth, heat sensitivity, cold sensitivity, stiffness, swelling, pain in the neck, anxiety attacks, agitation, liver pain, hair loss, premature gray hair, brain fog, and genital sweating.

The bottom of the page adds: "Unfortunately this is not a complete list of symptoms." If you haven't suffered at least a dozen of the listed symptoms in the past year it's a bad sign because it means you're probably an android.

If this sounds like so much horse hockey to you, you wouldn't make a good reporter, to judge from some of the credulous article titles on the subject: "Sick of Work: Chemical Poisons at the Office Can Put You at Risk" (*Calgary Herald*), "When Life is Toxic" (*New York Times*), "Environmental Illness: The New Plague" (*Utne Reader*), "Why You May Be Allergic to Your Home" (*McCall's*), and "Allergic to the 20th Century" (*Health*).

There are about 400 doctors in the country (generally called "clinical toxicologists") who will treat you for this strange malady, using even stranger remedies. A favorite: saunas which "sweat out toxins," even though you can't sweat out a toxin because the sweat glands aren't connected to any of the organs that process toxins.

Other treatments include administering coffee enemas (what would Mrs. Olson or Juan Valdez say?), injecting or drinking one's own urine, administering vitamin C and other vitamins, and using the Oriental herb ginseng.

One Sacramento area specialist treats many of his patients with injections of the "north wind." That is, the air is bubbled through water and the water is then injected into the patient. Why the north wind? Because many of his patients complain they feel worse when the wind blows from that direction.

If by now you're absolutely convinced this is baloney, you're in good company.

No major medical association accepts MCS. It has been rejected by such groups as the American Medical Association, the California Medical Association, the American Academy of Allergy and Immunology, the Board of the International Society of Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology and the American College of Physicians.

For example, the AMA's task force said, "No scientific evidence supports the contention that [MCS] is a significant cause of disease or that the diagnostic tests and the treatments used have any therapeutic value" and "multiple chemical sensitivity should not be considered a recognized clinical syndrome."



MCS is so widely defined that if you haven't had a large number of the symptoms attributed to it, you must be mechanical.

Nobody is saying that people claiming to have MCS aren't really suffering. It's just that their ailments are psychological in origin, not chemical. That has been the conclusion of doctors such as William Black of the University of Iowa and Denver psychologist Herman Staudenmayer, who has evaluated hundreds of such patients.

"It's clear just from talking with some [MCS patients] that they had ordinary depression," said Dr. Black, whose study on the subject appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

What most MCS sufferers want is help. Their strange symptoms are their way of crying for it. MCS is their way of coping with life. By blaming their illnesses on outside forces, be it carpet makers or oil refiners, these people get a sense of satisfaction. But satisfaction is not happiness.

For many MCS sufferers, help is just a good, understanding doctor away. "If they were offered standard antidepressant treatments, their symptoms would probably go away very promptly," Black told me.

Sadly, for all too many that will never happen. With an army of clinical ecologists raking in the bucks by keeping their patients ill, and with a media that thinks it's doing MCS sufferers a favor by eschewing medical science in favor of victims' pre-formed beliefs, all too many sick people remain destined to stay that way forever, trapped in a hell of their own creation.

Read Michael Fumento's additional work on [multiple chemical sensitivity](#).

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