

BIOGRAPHY ARTICLES ADVISE & DISSENT BOOKS BOOK HIM! SEARCH CONTACT HOME

SCENTS AND SENSELESSNESS

BY MICHAEL FUMENTO

The American Spectator, April 2000
Copyright 2000 by The American Spectator

ShareThis  Print this  Make text larger  Make text smaller

Search Site

Nine cafeteria workers from the Dirksen Senate Office Building cafeteria in Washington, D.C. were rushed to the hospital last August. "Everyone was getting sick headaches, stomachaches, vomiting, diarrhea," said a cafeteria cashier. One worker suffered head and neck injuries when she collapsed, and the eight others reported nausea. "I threw up. I had a headache. I felt very lightheaded, nauseated," said one.

The cause of this "poisoning"? "The haz-mat [hazardous material] unit went down, and all the readings were negative," a police officer said. "What they found was a bag of onions...and they just gave off a strong odor."

A year earlier, no fewer than 170 students, teachers, and others sought emergency treatment at Warren County High School in McMinnville, Tennessee, after a teacher whiffed an odor that she said turned her stomach. Authorities shut down the school of 2,000 students for more than two weeks, and nearly \$100,000 was spent on emergency care alone.

The cause of the odor may never be known, but the cause of the outbreak? Mass hysteria, according to an investigation reported in the January 13, 2000 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Witness ye the powers of man's most underrated sense, that of the nose. A school of 2,000 sounds like a lot, but what if you heard that fragrance fright has already swept an entire province in Canada and become institutionalized? What if you heard that there were efforts to essentially turn the entire United States into a Dirksen building cafeteria or Warren County High School, that powerful environmental groups are involved, and that something already generally accepted by the media called "Multiple Chemical Sensitivity" has already paved the way?



IT CAME FROM NOVA SCOTIA



Before you put another shrimp on the barbie, mate, make sure your neighbor won't sue you over the smell.

In Ottawa, public buses ask riders to be seated only without scents, while the Queensway-Carleton Hospital has embarked on a "No Scents Is Good Sense" campaign. At least one high school outside Toronto has gone fragrance-free. And though Canada is hardly litigious compared to its southern neighbor, a Toronto resident filed suit against a neighbor for invading her air space with cooking smells. On Prince Edward Island, off the country's east coast, a joint union-employer recommendation recently was made to ban perfumes and aftershaves from government offices.

Yet nowhere is it worse than ocean-fresh Halifax, Nova Scotia. Most of the city's public institutions, and a number of private businesses, now request or demand that workers be "scent-free."

The Halifax Chronicle-Herald prohibits its 350 employees from using perfume, aftershave, scented deodorant, shampoo, or even strong-smelling mouthwash on the job. "It's no different from a business's vacation policy," the newspaper's personnel manager says. "Either you abide by it or you don't work there." Meanwhile, a 1,400-employee telephone service center has declared itself off-limits to fragrance. Reminders pop up on computer screens when employees log on. Warning signs are posted in toilets reminding you not to use toiletries. Violators are sent home to take a shower on unpaid time (presumably using unscented soap).

Why all the fuss? Because some Canadians claim that fragrances are giving them, well, the same symptoms as those claimed by the Dirksen building cafeteria workers. It seems the more word spreads that fragrances can make you feel ill, the more people say they do get ill from fragrances. Some even claim that one whiff of a fragrance leads them to develop reactions to a huge variety of smells and other agents. The syndrome is most commonly known as "multiple chemical sensitivity" (MCS) or "environmental illness" (EI).

HALIFAX HYSTERIA

The Halifax holy war started in 1991 when hundreds of staff members at the Camp Hill Medical Center reported illness from what was widely regarded as polluted indoor air. Apparently the ventilation system was sucking in fumes from the powerful kitchen dishwasher. Although the

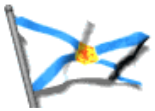


Toilets carry warnings against use of toiletries. Employees dare not raise a stink.

problem was soon fixed, some workers contend they are sick to this day. Labor unions have taken up their cause, demanding cleaner air in area hospitals. Government buildings, schools, and other public buildings have also moved to cleanse their air of odors, posting voluntary no-fragrance notices. About 80 percent of Halifax's 146 schools now have some form of scent-free policy. Anti-fragrance policies also appear to be the norm at most of the city's workplaces.

"Halifax, Nova Scotia, has been able to do what the FDA, the European Commission, and other regulatory agencies have been unable to do," declares fragrance foe Betty Bridges, who heads the Virginia-based Fragranced Products Information Network. The city has struck "fear in the heart of the fragrance industry."

Certainly it has in the local fragrance industry. "At first I thought it was a tempest in a teapot. I mean, they can't be serious, right?" says Patrick Carroll, a general manager for Calvin Klein Cosmetics in Oakville, Ontario. They were. "Our [Nova Scotia] business has certainly stagnated and probably declined," he said. Marilyn Pellerin, fragrance manager for Mills Brothers, an upscale Halifax apparel store, says perfume sales have fallen off by about a third compared with five years ago.



Halifax, Land of the Free – scent-free that is.

There's been no significant opposition to the fragrance fighters, Pellerin told me. "I think it tends to be a very sympathetic population, so that if you and I were to share an office and you felt my fragrance was bothering you, I wouldn't wear it. What happens in a maritime region is that people tend to be kind and sympathetic, and you do everything in your power to accommodate someone else," says Pellerin. "But then [the fragrance foes] just pushed and pushed and pushed. I don't think in the beginning people realized quite how invasive this might become. I call it the Halifax Hysteria Hotbed."

"Many of the hospitals have gone [to a ban], so people think it's medically correct," Pellerin says. Given the prevailing view at local universities, at least one of which has launched a campaign discouraging the use of scented products, "they think it's intellectually correct," she says.

"It's not just perfumes," Pellerin adds. "One receptionist at one of the local hospitals says that ink in newsprint is causing her allergic reactions and she's asking that newspapers be kept out of the lobby."

Because the bans are so broad (recall the one forbidding mouthwash), because there's no set definition of what a fragrance is, and because both the symptoms and the degree of accommodation needed are self-determined, the rules are inherently arbitrary. Some don't see that as a problem.

"We have scent-free...restaurants and scent-free offices everywhere here!" gloats activist Karen Robinson of Halifax.

Now she has even more to gloat about. In February, a member of the Canadian parliament introduced legislation that would order the Minister of Health to "establish the existence of environmental illnesses." (Note: the minister wasn't being asked to establish whether they exist. That's already a foregone conclusion.)

FEAR OF FRAGRANCES

Since there's a victim's group for absolutely everything in North America, not surprisingly there are a few for those who disdainfully refer to fragrances as "skunk juice." Their ribbon is blue and yellow. As to what ails them, you name it and they suffer from it.

Betty Bridges's Fragranced Products Information Network, quoting verbatim from a newsletter put out by the late Julia Kendall of Marin County, just north of San Francisco, claims:

Symptoms provoked by fragrances include: watery or dry eyes, double vision, sneezing, nasal congestion, sinusitis, tinnitus, ear pain, dizziness, vertigo, coughing, bronchitis, difficulty breathing, difficulty swallowing, asthma, anaphylaxis, headaches, migraine, seizures, fatigue, confusion, disorientation, incoherence, short-term memory loss, inability to concentrate, nausea, lethargy, anxiety, irritability, depression, mood swings, restlessness, rashes, hives, eczema, flushing, muscle and joint pain, muscle weakness, irregular heartbeat, hypertension, swollen lymph glands and more.

Another olfactory activist, Barb Wilke from the San Francisco area, informs us via the Web that:

Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's, Lupus, and Alzheimer's are all neurological disorders. Dyslexia is a neurological dysfunction. Could any of these neurological dysfunctions be caused by exposure to neurotoxic chemicals? Symptoms are often identical to chemical hypersensitivity. Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is also a neurological dysfunction. Could fragrant fabric softeners or detergents emitting neurotoxic chemicals cause the neurological breakdown?

If you have an infant, you're probably already rushing to toss out these products. Don't. SIDS isn't a neurological dysfunction. "When you find nothing, then that's what SIDS is, a death that remains unexplained. It isn't like finding disease," explains Betty McEntire, executive director of the American SIDS Institute.

Wilke's "source" is a number of documents in which she combines 2 plus 2 and arrives at 526. Kendall's source is something called the "Candida Research and Information Foundation, Perfume Survey, Winter 1989-90." The foundation, located north of San Francisco, is a supporter of MCS. The survey has no medical validity. Indeed, a Nexis computer database search of newspapers, magazines, and medical and science journals showed virtually no references to the foundation except for Kendall's.

Still, Halifax's Robinson told the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, "The main point we've been making is that it's a health issue, not a matter of likes and dislikes." Really? Then how to explain that in Japan perfume is actually funneled through classrooms, and teachers are encouraged to wear it? The Japanese feel it



Don't even think about gargling here!



No, fabric softeners aren't fatal for babies.

makes their senses cleaner. In South Korea, a man has invented a self-perfuming business suit. Are we to believe he's the Jack Kevorkian of East Asia? Fragranced furniture is all the rage in Britain. And finally, what of those French? Ooh-la-la!

PASSIVE SMELLING?

Greame Gilday, a health and safety officer with the York Region (Toronto's province) District School Board, travels from school to school with a troupe of Aurora High drama students, who perform under a banner declaring "No Scents Make Sense." He compares smelling other people's fragrances to the dire claims some have made about inhaling others' cigarette smoke.

"If you go from the 50's to the 90's and look at smoking, guess what's going to happen with scents?" he warns. Virginia Salares, a chemist and researcher with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, likens perfume to "invisible smoke." The odors "are unwanted intruders. Perfume is a pollutant generated by the occupant that the occupant can do something about."

"Many of the chemicals found in smoke and second-hand smoke are the same chemicals that are found in perfume products," Karen Robinson says. That's almost certainly true; with so many chemicals in each, there's bound to be some overlap. It's what also makes the comparison rather ludicrous. Yet the reporter from the *Toronto Globe and Mail* who quoted Robinson interjected that "that point is controversial, but an increasing number of health care authorities are willing to concede it." The only support offered for this claim is a quote from a nurse at a Nova Scotia MCS clinic.

Activist Bridges admits, "While the dangers of second-hand smoke have been widely studied and publicized, both the scientific community and the press have largely ignored the dangers of exposures to fragrances." She draws on some innate source of knowledge to declare, "The two are quite similar in contribution to indoor air pollution as well as social and political aspects."

Other aspects such as lack of regulation, labeling laws, and "personal rights further complicate the issue," writes Bridges. Yes, those "personal rights" can be such pesky things.



Like smokers, fragrance wearers may become pariahs.

There's even a connection to smoking in general, says Marilyn Pellerin. "If you say there's no scientific data to back perfume prohibition, they say, 'Aha, that's what the tobacco companies said!'" Indeed, it is. Some companies have valid scientific data supporting their health claims; some don't. It's quite a leap to say that any company that tries to defend itself scientifically is therefore inherently wrong.

WHAT KNOWS THE NOSE?

So what's the connection between fragrances and MCS? It's simple. "Most of the time somebody responds to a chemical, they're responding to an odor," says Pam Dalton, a cognitive psychologist with the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia, which is chiefly funded by the National Institutes of Health and by some private companies as well. "Odor perception is almost always going to be the first cue that there's a chemical in the environment."

So odors become a whipping boy, so to speak, for chemicals. But then it gets turned around, so that chemicals with no other purpose than to create odors, namely fragrances, become culprits in and of themselves.

If someone believes that man-made or perhaps just man-bottled chemicals are harmful (as apparently most everyone in Halifax now believes) then smelling anything not immediately recognizable as a natural odor can be alarming, even frightening.

"I think people can be made more sensitive by thinking and talking about fragrances," says Dalton. "Ten years ago I think I would not have had the same reaction to cigarette smoke that I do now." Because there's less in the air and more on the airwaves in the form of discussions and warnings, she has become much more aware of the odor and likely to react to it.

This shift makes all the more sense in that smell, like any of the other senses, can be a warning device. But whereas eyes are very good at distinguishing between, say, an extended handgun or just an extended hand, the nose has a harder time with odors, which tend to be more ambiguous.

Monell researchers have shown that people do react differently to a chemical's smell solely on the basis of a preconception of what the odor represented or whether it was from a natural or synthetic source. "We would tell one person that an odor was a fragrance, and another it's a strong industrial chemical," Dalton told me. "People would say the odor was more intense if told it was industrial, and they reported more health symptoms, such as coughing, headache, chest tightness, and dizziness. And these are just normal people, not ones claiming to have MCS," Dalton says.

Further, some of these reactions apparently never actually occurred. "When we monitor some of these people, they would report coughing or sneezing, but it certainly wasn't audible," says Dalton. There was no reason for these people to lie; they just convinced themselves something had happened that hadn't.

Herman Staudenmayer, a Denver psychologist who has had over 500 alleged MCS cases referred to him, published a paper last August focusing on a woman who was awarded workers' compensation after complaining of sensitivity to fragrances. "She complained of seizures," Staudenmayer told me. "Upon exposure to various fragrances she would show behavioral signs of seizure activity, including muscle jerking, becoming disoriented, non-responsive, and giving classic signs of what she believed a seizure



Public Enemy Number One



would look like." As she underwent this "seizure," Staudenmayer's co-author, Dr. Ronald Kramer, medical director at the Colorado Neurological Institute Epilepsy Center in Englewood, conducted a video electroencephalogram (EEG) to measure her brain wave patterns. "While she was showing overt signs of 'seizure,' her EEG was perfectly normal," Staudenmayer says. "That just doesn't happen with a real seizure."

*The nose:
sensitive but
innaccurate.*

The woman wasn't exactly faking it. After all, she willingly submitted to the EEG. But her reaction was a "learned sensitivity," Staudenmayer explains. "She had been led to believe she should react to fragrances and that this should be her reaction."

Can something carried in the odor itself be debilitating? "There's no reliable way of simulating odor in absence of some chemical," says Dalton, because you always have to use one to mask another. "So it becomes something of a circular argument. But there have been studies showing people with reported sensitivity to a certain chemical didn't react to it when the odor was masked."

If somebody becomes non-psychosomatically ill at the smell of something, "it's not really the odor, it's the chemical that's coincident with the odor," says Dalton. Thus, natural gas can kill you but the odor added to it to warn of its presence is harmless. A truly strong odor can be overpowering, of course. But, says Dalton, "there's a tendency to assume that if we can smell it, it must be in a potent concentration." Considering that the whole purpose of a fragrance is to cause smell, that's obviously a false assumption. "In short," she says, "there's not a lot of evidence that fragrances at concentrations being experienced are having an adverse affect."

But all MCS silliness aside, could it at least be that some people are simply more sensitive to odors than others are? "For years people have hypothesized that," says Staudenmayer. "But there's nothing in the medical literature to back it up."

MCS: SKUNK SCIENCE

Anybody can be allergic to a given ingredient or collection of ingredients in fragrances. But some 3,000 different chemicals have been identified in fragrances, which makes for an almost infinite number of possible combinations. Some of the chemicals are natural; some are synthetic. So the only thing all fragrances have in common is that they're fragrant. To be allergic to all of them is like being allergic to everything beginning with the letter F. This condition is not an allergy in any normally accepted sense of the word. Hence the term MCS (often also called not just "ecological illness," but "toxic encepholopy" or even "chemical AIDS"). Doctors who treat MCS patients also go by several names, but "clinical ecologist" and "environmental physician" seem most common.



Dr. Grace Ziem, a prominent environmental physician in Emmitsburg, Maryland, says MCS may be the "largest unrecognized epidemic in the United States today." To her it's an "unrecognized" illness, but major U.S. health bodies apply the adjective to the syndrome itself. The American Medical Association, the American Medical Council on Scientific Affairs, the American College of Physicians, the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, and the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology have all rejected MCS as a legitimate organic disease, with the last two reaffirming their position just last year.

The Council on Scientific Affairs considered revisiting the topic last year, but found no compelling evidence to change its earlier conclusions. Canadian authorities by and large have avoided taking a position. There's been a move among medical and scientific bodies in the U.S. and elsewhere toward replacing "MCS" with the term ideopathic (literally, "of unknown origin") environmental intolerance, which allows for the possibility that chemicals have nothing to do with it.


A 1998 draft report on MCS from a U.S. government interagency workgroup also found the disorder lacked an accepted case definition, that limitations abound in published studies on MCS, and that no widely accepted protocols have proved effective in addressing symptoms of MCS.

Washington University medical Professor H. James Wedner takes a rather jaundiced view. He notes that, as with most mystery syndromes, "middle-class white women are most likely to complain of it." He says: "Typically, they're well off enough that they can afford to drop out if they're allergic to their entire environment. If you're poor, you simply can't afford to have Multiple Chemical Sensitivity syndrome. We don't laugh at them, but our feeling is this is not a true clinical entity."

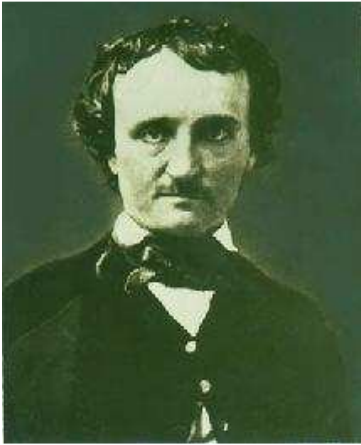
Iowa University Medical Center psychiatrist Dr. Donald Black has studied MCS for many years. "The conclusion I draw in an upcoming medical journal report," he told me, "is that almost all studies have found an excess of mental illness in these individuals."

While it's not okay to deride those who believe they have MCS, it's perfectly proper to hoot and holler at the bizarre theories and sometimes harmful "treatments" of doctors who keep MCS patients on a perpetual psychological leash.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch quoted what it identified as an allergist but was clearly a clinical ecologist offering such pearls of wisdom as: "Don't breathe in what you cannot eat." But only a small portion of the odors to which we are exposed come from food. She also suggests looking for biodegradable products at local health food stores, as if the ability of something to rapidly break down in a garbage dump somehow makes it healthier. "Avoid things that have distinct odors," she concludes. So much for the benefits of onion and garlic.


*"No more garlic?
Mama mia,
howwa we gonna
maka the sauce?"*

Albert Donnay, executive director of MCS Referral and Resources, which provides so-called expert testimony in court cases and sends patients to clinical ecologists, recently took a baseball bat to a hornet's nest when he opined that MCS caused by breathing in carbon monoxide from coal gas lamps chronically afflicted Edgar Allan Poe and influenced his writing. Critics quickly noted that Poe was both an opium addict and an alcoholic, had suffered tremendous personal tragedy, and that in any case everyone in cities back then inhaled carbon monoxide from gas-lit lamps without sitting down to write *The Raven* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*. By great coincidence, Donnay also directs something called Carbon Monoxide Referral & Resources.



Poe's ailments couldn't have been caused by alcoholism or opium addiction – it had to be MCS!

Grace Ziem admitted to me that she's diagnosed MCS in practically every patient she's ever seen. In the mid-1980's, Canadian investigators looked through the files of the most prominent (and notorious) clinical ecologist, Dr. William Rea of the Environmental Health Center in Dallas. A sampling of 2,000 files revealed that a mere four out of 2,000 patients had tested negative for environmental sensitivity, apparently because they had been diagnosed with cancer. The reviewers said that Rea used "no appropriate controls and the patients were assumed to have environmental hypersensitivity mainly by being referred to the unit." Rea claims to have seen over 20,000 patients, and it strains credibility that out of all the hypochondriacs and persons with psychosomatic illness that are out there, none manage to find their way to Rea's clinic. So detractors of MCS are wrong when they say it has no solid definition. A visit to a clinical ecologist means you have MCS; how much more solid can you get?

And once they've snared you, they rarely let go. As New York psychologist Herbert Spiegel put it, "[The patients] just keep going back to their doctors week after week, taxing their insurance companies and enriching the physicians while continuing to live in misery." Dr. Stephen Barrett, a Pennsylvania psychiatrist who specializes in exposing quackery, says: "Clinical ecologists are a menace to society and should have their licenses revoked."

One commonly prescribed treatment for MCS is isolation from modern chemicals, which often translates into isolation, period. This does not foster mental health. Further, a diagnosis of MCS can keep a patient with a true, perhaps even life-threatening organic problem from seeing a proper doctor. Some clinical ecologists have been sanctioned for such negligence. According to allegedly clinical studies by MCS doctors, anywhere from 15 percent to a third of the general U.S. population suffers symptoms ranging from annoying

to fatal.

Surprisingly, MCS claims have not become a plaintiff's paradise. Federal courts do not consider environmental illness or MCS a scientifically valid diagnosis. Thus one specifically excluded the possibility of MCS under the Supreme Court's 1993 William Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals decision as "unsupported by sound scientific reasoning or methodology." "I think Daubert so crushed this thing that if it is an MCS case, they're changing the terminology," says Bonnie Semilof, a Washington, D.C. attorney who used to fight numerous MCS cases. "I think it's just lost its appeal," she says, no pun intended.

Unfortunately, Daubert doesn't extend to the most important court: that of public opinion. Indeed, it doesn't even cover state courts. In September, a class action lawsuit filed in California contended that carbonless copy paper violated the state's Proposition 65. Adopted by voters in 1986, that law requires companies to give a "clear and reasonable" warning before knowingly exposing anyone to carcinogens or other hazardous chemicals on a state-published list. The suit, naming 12 manufacturers as defendants, asserts that at least three chemicals on the list are used in carbonless paper. American mills produce three-quarters of a million tons of it each year, and we've all likely been exposed. But the defendants claim to have suffered from headaches, bronchitis, red and swollen eyes, vertigo, migraines, fatigue, sinus infections, and laryngitis. This last symptom was in a woman who spent all day on the phone answering customers' questions. Victims have their own activist group, the Carbonless Copy Paper Injury and Information Network. It has a Website (www.carbonless.org), but so far, no ribbon.

COULD IT HAPPEN HERE?

"Wow. They're way ahead of us," says Claudia Miller about Halifax's fragrance fanaticism. Miller is a clinical ecologist at the University of Texas Health Science Center and co-author of a book on chemical sensitivities. The obvious implication is: "Today Halifax; tomorrow the world."

The bad news is, the fragrance fighters have already gained a toehold in the U.S. The good news is that, for the moment at least, it seems confined to Northern California. San Francisco's Ecology House, an institution for alleged MCS sufferers, posts rules forbidding, among other things,

- perfume, cologne or after-shave;
- hair spray, mousse, scented shampoo, or hair conditioner;
- scented deodorant, lotion, lipstick;
- any scented personal care or cosmetic product;
- recently dry-cleaned clothing;
- scented laundry detergents;
- fabric softener or dryer sheets (even those labeled unscented or fragrance-free);
- shoe polish;
- chewing gum.

Chewing gum? Meanwhile, the San Francisco Chapter of the Sierra Club has urged action to discourage the use of fragrance products in all public places. If you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear only fake flowers in your hair.

"Fragrance products worn by people a block away adversely affect the chemically sensitive," claims Marin County's Barb Wilke. A block away?

"No one should be wearing perfume to the theater," the influential California activist Julia Kendall told author James Bovard. "Why should we have brain damage because people are wearing toxic chemicals?" Her agenda? "Basically, we want to destroy the fragrance industry."



With no Second Amendment to the Constitution to rely on and no hope of getting Charlton Heston to rally to their cause, skunk juice wearers may be in for a tough fight if the Body Odor Liberation Front breaks out of its Canadian and Californian cordons. At the very least maybe they should start printing up bumper stickers reading, "If Giorgio is outlawed, only outlaws will wear Giorgio" and "You'll get my Chanel No. 5 when you pry it from my cold, dead, but pleasant-smelling fingers."

Chewing gum can be a problem, but not in the way MCS proponents would have you think.

Reactions to this article:

- ["Scent Censoring Incenses"](#)
- ["Scents-orship"](#)
- ["Environmental Illness? Nonscents!"](#)
- ["Scents and Sensibility"](#)
- [Halifax Hysteria"](#)

Another version of this article: [Senseless Scent Patrol](#) (The Washington Times, May 7, 2000).

Read Michael Fumento's additional work on [MCS](#), on [laws](#) and on [alarmism](#).

SUPPORT INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM!

Without your help, we can't keep bringing no-nonsense, fact-based stories to your attention.

[Subscribe](#) [Donate](#)



Michael Fumento is a practicing attorney and freelance writer who specializes in debunking misinformation cascades.
fumento@pobox.com

[BIOGRAPHY](#) [ARTICLES](#) [ADVISE & DISSENT](#) [BOOKS](#) [SEARCH](#) [CONTACT](#) [HOME](#)
