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SICK OF IT ALL BY MICHAEL FUMENTO

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Karen was the librarian at a newspaper in Los Angeles where I worked. When we moved to new offices, somebody told her the library's bookshelves contained formaldehyde. Soon she was suffering from a headache, aching joints, and labored breathing. But then Karen heard there was no formaldehyde in the shelves. Suddenly the symptoms disappeared. A colleague later told me that it turned out the shelves contained formaldehyde after all, but Karen remained blissfully ignorant of this and hence free of symptoms.

Depending on whom you ask, either this was clearly not a case of multiple chemical sensitivity, because the woman's symptoms were psychosomatic, or it was a good illustration of what multiple chemical sensitivity is in fact all about.

"Multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS) is a dangerous diagnosis," begins an editorial by Ronald E. Gots in the March 1995 *Journal of Toxicology*. Gots is executive director of Environmental Sensitivities Research Institute in Rockville, Maryland, a clearinghouse for scientific data. He continues: "Unlike many 'alternative medical practices,' the diagnosis of MCS begins a downward spiral of fruitless treatments, culminating in withdrawal from society and condemning the sufferer to a life of misery and disability. This is a phenomenon in which the diagnosis is far more disabling than the symptoms."

Mainstream medical science agrees with Gots. But many Americans beg to differ, because they're convinced they have the disease. To them, the symptoms of MCS are all too real, and an MCS diagnosis simply tells it like it is. And even the most cynical observer has to admit that many of these people are suffering terribly. They often bounce from doctor to doctor, seeing as many as two dozen in a year because nobody seems able to treat them or to take their complaints seriously. (Only 400 or so U.S. doctors, known as "clinical ecologists" or "environmental physicians," treat MCS.) MCS patients sometimes have scores of complaints. They give up much of what most Americans consider the necessities of life. Sometimes they feel forced to move away from friends and family in search of a "safer community."

People who claim to suffer from MCS are receiving not just sympathy but official recognition and legal privileges. In 1992, the Department of Housing and Urban Development said people with MCS can seek protection under federal housing discrimination laws. In one lawsuit, a Virginia housing development agreed to stop using pesticides near the home of a woman who claimed to be chemically sensitive. MCS advocates argue that the case should set a precedent for lawsuits in the workplace as well.

Many federal agencies, including the Social Security Administration, the Department of Education, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Occupational Health and Safety Administration, have issued policy statements to help staff members deal with citizens' MCS claims. The Social Security Administration will now make disability payments to people who can demonstrate to the government's satisfaction that they have been incapacitated by MCS. HUD provided \$1.2 million to build an Ecology House for MCS sufferers in Marin County as part of a program intended to "support housing for people with disabilities."

Many journalists have been credulous as well, to judge from articles with titles such as "Sick of Work: Chemical Poisons at the Office Can Put You at Risk" *Calgary Herald*, "When Life is Toxic" *The 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*.

So who's right? Are MCS sufferers really sick? Or is what has been called "the ultimate 20th century illness" really one of the great hoaxes of the 20th century? Could it be both?

The idea of MCS has a certain intuitive appeal to anyone who is familiar with allergies. But both the causes and effects of MCS are said to be much broader. People who believe MCS is real generally describe it as a breakdown of the immune or nervous system caused by an overload of offending agents. Often a single agent is cited as the proverbial back-breaking straw. The agents blamed for MCS are not always chemicals (electromagnetic fields are often mentioned), which is why many prefer the term "ecological illness" to MCS. Other names include "chemical hypersensitivity," "environmental hypersensitivity," "total allergy syndrome," "cerebral allergy," "chemical AIDS," and "20th Century Disease."

In February a World Health Organization (WHO) workshop in Berlin concluded that MCS should be called "idiopathic environmental intolerances," with idiopathic defined as "self-originated" or "of unknown causation."

