

Proceedings of a Workshop

**MULTIPLE CHEMICAL SENSITIVITIES
AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO PSYCHIATRIC
DISORDERS**

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Organized by
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PREFACE

There are people who are unusually sensitive to chemical and other substances in the environment and a diagnostic label of Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS) is being applied frequently. There are no reliable data on the prevalence of MCS. In fact, there are no reliable diagnostic criteria yet established. Symptoms may be related to many organ systems, but central neurologic and mucosal symptoms frequently stand out. The non-specific nature of the complaints, lack of abnormal objective findings, and absence of a generally accepted diagnostic laboratory test make diagnosis of MCS difficult.

The chronic nature of the complaints in MCS patients associated with symptoms of central nervous system dysfunction such as depression, anxiety, irritability and difficulty concentrating may lead to psychiatric diagnosis such as major depression, neurasthenia or somatization disorder. Psychiatric diagnoses are descriptive labels for a set of signs and symptoms and do not offer an etiological explanation for them. "Symptomatology related to multiple chemicals is a distinct feature of these patients that is not classifiable by existing criteria used in conventional medical practice for psychiatric or physical illness and cannot be uniquely coded in either DSM III-R* or ICD-9**" ("Multiple Chemical Sensitivities", National Research Council, Washington, 1991). On the other hand, patients with MCS may show improvement with antidepressant and cognitive therapy. An overlap between the biology of depression and certain MCS and multiple food sensitivities syndromes has been suggested.

"The emergence of multiple chemical sensitivity as a phenomenon that needs investigation coincides

with recognition that myriad exposures to environmental agents are sustained in indoor and outdoor environments" (National Research Council, Washington, 1991). The challenge is for the clinical investigator to determine whether adverse health effects are associated with low level exposures to these chemicals.

In May 1990, the Laboratory Centre for Disease Control (LCDC) held a workshop to identify and develop priorities for multidisciplinary research and to identify education/health promotion needs and explore social problems of affected persons. The workshop proceedings were published in *Chronic Diseases in Canada* (1991).

To further explore the issue of MCS, and particularly its relevance to psychiatric disorders, the workshop on "Multiple Chemical Sensitivities and Their Relevance to Psychiatric Disorders" was organized by the Mental Health Division, Health Programs and Services Branch, and the Laboratory Centre for Disease Control, Health Protection Branch.

The workshop consisted of presentations by experts in the relevant areas followed by two working group sessions focused on specific tasks. The following proceedings contain a summary of the presentation by each of the speakers and a report from each of the working groups. The speakers' original papers on which their presentations were based are included in the appendix.

* Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Third Edition Revised, American Psychiatric Association, Washington, DC, 1987.

** International Classification of Diseases - 9th Revision. World Health Organization, 1977.