

When the chemical industry woke up to the threat of MCS

Around 1990 the chemical industry in the United States got really concerned over how MCS could impact them.

Keywords: MCS, chemical sensitivity, environmental illness, history, opposition, chemical industry, environmental illness briefing paper

The gathering storm

Multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) was mostly known as environmental illness around 1990 when it seemed to gather a lot of interest. Many employees were sickened when the EPA installed new carpeting at their Washington, DC headquarters in 1987. Some went on permanent disability. There were complaints and lawsuits from employees working with toxic chemicals, such as at the aircraft manufacturer Boeing and at Silicon Valley chip factories.

Several people's stories with MCS were told in newspapers, especially in California. The occupational medicine specialist Mark Cullen edited the 1987 book *Workers with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities*.

The professors Nicholas Ashford and Claudia Miller prepared a 1989 report on MCS for the New Jersey State Department of Health (the duo soon after published the landmark book *Chemical Exposures: low levels – high stakes*).

It looked like a storm was gathering.

The CMA briefing paper

In 1990 the Chemical Manufacturers Association produced an “*Environmental Illness*” *Briefing Paper*. It was intended for their members only.

The paper laid out the threat that MCS posed to their members and to a wide range of businesses, including hospitals, dry cleaners, lawn care, clothing, paints as well as many types of consumer products. The authors thought it quite possible that legislators would accept MCS (or “misperceive environmental illness as medically legitimate” as the paper states it). That could lead to “enormous cost,” the paper warned.

A particular threat was the expensive lawsuits from people made sick by toxic products.

The paper then provided an overview of the scientific controversy, which was substantial, as there was very little actual science available. Four medical societies had also issued statements critical of MCS.

A little ridicule was also used:

The basic fallacy in their reasoning is that the observed symptoms may be induced by many other causes. An equivalent example of such erroneous reasoning is that if a rooster crows every morning before sunrise, then the sun rises because roosters crow. (pg 13)

What to do with the patients was very clear:

Emphasis should be placed on proper psychological diagnosis and treatment . . . (pg 14)

As for dealing with the press, the paper recommended:

Identify medical personnel familiar with environmental illness who can speak as experts . . . Informally offer guidance and background materials to reporters. . . . (pg 15)

The paper then discussed the current thinking of the courts, which were universally dismissive of MCS claims of tort and disability at the time.

Activists had attempted to get help from the state legislatures in California, Connecticut, Maryland and Florida with modest success. Both chambers of the California legislature passed a 1984 bill to fund research into MCS, but governor Deukmajian was convinced to veto it.

These attempts were a threat to the chemical industry and needed to be opposed (pg 20):

Legislators and respective staff should be wary of legislation attempting to review and redress the issue of environmental illness . . .

Environmental illness bills should be thoroughly critiqued . . .

When considering a bill, legislators should remember that environmental illness is a gray area, one which has not proven its existence in the medical area and one which has no precedence in state statutes.

The briefing paper concludes with the suggestion that the chemical industry forms a coalition with other industry groups that have “an interest in placing environmental illness in its proper perspective,” including insurance companies, the pesticide/herbicide industry, food industry, auto industry, aerospace industry, cleaning agent industry, homebuilders and many more. It then states:

. . . a coalition with the state medical association is absolutely necessary.
(pg 22-23)

The briefing paper was intended for the CMA member firms and not for the public, but MCS activists quickly got hold of a copy. It was reprinted in the Fall 1990 issue of the MCS newsletter *The New Reactor* and is now also available on the web and in various archives.

The Chemical & Engineering News article

The July 22, 1991 issue of the industry magazine *Chemical & Engineering News* had a seventeen-page article about MCS. Surprisingly, it was a balanced article with input from people both dismissive and supportive of MCS.

It is a landmark article that describes the situation in 1991, where some physicians were afraid of being disciplined if they even suggest that people avoid certain chemical exposures. A time where the issue had become so emotionally charged that constructive dialogue was very difficult.

The article lays out the financial risk (pg 31):

Clearly, the economic stakes in this issue are very high . . . the chemical industry and other industries whose products seem to cause the illness could be faced with many more thousands of very costly lawsuits.

And there would be many other costs — to the individual . . . to the employer . . . to manufacturers . . . to building owners and managers . . . to the government . . . to medical insurance companies.

A spokesperson for a national MCS support group is quoted as saying that they are contacted by five hundred new people each month who inquire about how to deal with MCS. Ten years before, it was a hundred each month. The problems seemed to be rising.

The tide recedes

In the early 1990s it seemed to the MCS activists that they were slowly but surely gaining ground. One visible result was the building of Ecology House, an apartment building in San Rafael, California. It was built with federal money to house people with MCS who could not otherwise afford a safe house.

The television program *Bad Chemistry* aired in December 1990 on the TV station KQED in San Francisco (and possibly other PBS stations). It interviewed several physicians, including the outspoken MCS opponent Abba Terr, but was clearly sympathetic to the sick people.

But around 1994 progress inexplicably halted, according to Susan Molloy who was very active at the time. Government agencies and others stopped talking to the MCS community, for no apparent reason. The tone in some media, most notably ABC's *Nightline*, turned very negative.

We still do not know what happened behind the scenes, but there are some obvious guesses.

The Fall 1990 issue of *The New Reactor* reported that the Chemical Manufacturers Association had approximately 175 member companies and twenty full-time lobbyists in Washington, D.C. The organization was in the process of establishing a Political Action Committee to funnel contributions to political candidates.

Other MCS history articles

www.eiwellspring.org/history.html.