

Protesters disrupt MCS medical conference

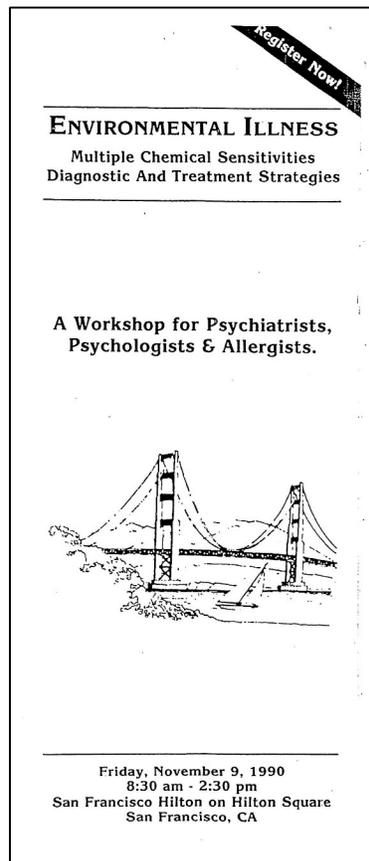
Demonstrators shut down a 1990 medical conference that claimed people with MCS were psychosomatic.

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The biased invitation

The American College of Allergy & Immunology held their 1990 annual medical conference at the San Francisco Hilton Hotel. On Friday, November 9th, there was a full-day workshop about Environmental Illness (MCS) advertised as “for Psychiatrists, Psychologists & Allergists” (see picture).

In the brochure were listed four speeches and a video presentation, all clearly against accepting MCS as a genuine illness.



The 12:45 p.m. speech was titled “Some Psychological Mechanisms to Consider in Evaluation and Treatment” by Dr. Herman Staudenmayer, a prominent proponent of labeling MCS as a mental illness.

The brochure prominently displayed a note that the workshop was sponsored by Sandoz Pharmaceuticals, which manufactured drugs to treat mental disorders. Sandoz Corporation also manufactured herbicides, pesticides and chemicals used for constructing buildings.

When an allergist who treated people with MCS received the brochure, he alerted some of the MCS activists in San Francisco about this outrage.

San Francisco had for years been a hotbed of demonstrations for peace, gay rights and other civil rights. It was natural for the MCS activists to want to do a demonstration. The problem was that most people with MCS were too sick or too fatigued to participate in a demonstration. It would not be effective with too few people.

Organizing

This was the height of the AIDS crisis in the United States and especially in San Francisco’s gay community. Thousands had died and there was still no effective treatment. The authorities largely ignored the epidemic because it mostly affected gays at the time. President Ronald Reagan didn’t even mention AIDS before 10,000 had died. The gay community protested with loud demonstrations, organized by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power).

The MCS and AIDS activists in San Francisco had a lot in common. Both illnesses were poorly understood by doctors and ignored by the health authorities. Both communities were also discriminated against in many ways and sometimes even heckled in the streets.

Some activists were active in both communities. It was natural to ask ACT UP for help.

The day of protest

One of the two organizers of the protest, Susan Molloy, paid regular admission and sat quietly through the morning sessions. As Susan Molloy recalls, the speakers were arrogantly saying that they had “proof” that MCS didn’t exist and claimed that the clinical ecologists (physicians accepting MCS) were just basing their opinions on anecdotes.

The video was more of the same, and presented four anecdotes as “proof” that MCS was psychosomatic. This was clearly a double standard.

After the video there was a discussion during lunch. The advice given to the audience was to talk to the MCS patient, tell them they are believed, show compassion, then talk them out of believing they have MCS.

Meanwhile, two dozen MCS and ACT UP activists started picketing on the sidewalk in front of the Hilton hotel. Two local TV stations were there, together with print journalists.

Activists were carrying signs saying “Better Living Through a Clean Environment” (a spoof on a Dow Chemical slogan), “Lazy Doctor’s Diagnosis: Psychosomatic” and “Don’t Dump Your Chemicals in My Body.” People with MCS participated, some with respirators or oxygen tanks, but most of the demonstrators were AIDS activists.

The Disruption

The disruption of the meeting happened at the start of Dr. Staudenmayer’s afternoon presentation.

A local physician, who treated people with MCS, walked up to the podium, grabbed the microphone, and started saying something like “you can’t do this,” while the demonstrators burst in through the doors with the media.

According to the *San Francisco Chronicle* the activists accused the physicians of dismissing them as crazy and that the doctors had been corrupted by the chemical industry (the Chemical Manufacturer’s Association had just come out with a briefing paper about MCS, that suggested they make alliances with physicians to discredit MCS).

One of the co-chairs then closed down the meeting and hastily walked out of the room.

The police arrived a few minutes later and politely escorted the protesters out of the hotel, including Susan Molloy, who was in a wheelchair.

Some of the MCS activists had stayed outside with their signs, as they did not dare enter the hotel and get sick from the carpeting, etc.

The *Bad Chemistry* TV program

The local TV station KQED (a PBS affiliate) was working on the TV program *Bad Chemistry* at the time of the protest. They sent a TV crew and there are nearly three minutes of footage from the demonstration at the end of *Bad Chemistry*. The program is sympathetic to people with MCS. It features interviews with multiple physicians, including Abba Terr who was a leading and vocal opponent of MCS (and present at the disrupted meeting). The program is available on YouTube.

Sources

Protesters Disrupt Allergy Conference, David Perlman, San Francisco Chronicle, Nov. 10, 1990.

Living With Environmental Illness, Christina Smith, The San Francisco Bay Times, December 1990.

Bad Chemistry, KQED TV San Francisco, 1990 (available on YouTube). The section about the protests is at: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=5Gfxp7bvaKc>

Interview with Susan Molloy (co-organizer of protest)

Other historic MCS articles

www.eiwellspring.org/history.html.