

The campaign to discredit MCS

Around 1990 the chemical industry in the United States got really concerned over how MCS could impact them and apparently decided to act. Within a few years people with MCS became widely regarded as psychiatric cases instead of having a legitimate illness.

Keywords: MCS, chemical sensitivity, environmental illness, history, opposition, chemical industry, disinformation, 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. More than a hundred employees were sickened when the EPA installed new carpeting at their Washington, DC headquarters in 1987 and 1988. Some went on permanent disability (Toufexis 1988; Svoboda, 1997).

A store customer had to be hospitalized for 11 days after an employee sprayed her with a fragrance (LA Times, 1989).

There were complaints and lawsuits from employees working with toxic chemicals, such as at the aircraft manufacturer Boeing and at Silicon Valley chip factories (Sparks, 1990; Hembree, 1986; Goad, 1990).

The occupational medicine specialist Mark Cullen edited the 1987 book *Workers with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities*, which created the term MCS and provided the first working definition.

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*).

In 1990 several major newspapers published large and sympathetic stories about people with MCS, both in California (Minton, 1990; Wallace, 1990; Busico, 1990; Smith, 1990; Wysham, 1990), in the *New York Times* (Belkin, 1990; Reinhold, 1990), and elsewhere (Champagne, 1990; Huckabee, 1990; Kanamine, 1990).

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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.

MCS activists were actively demanding recognition and civil rights (Perlman, 1990; Hileman, 1991). They were slowly gaining ground.

The federal agency Housing and Urban Development officially recognized MCS as a disability requiring "reasonable accommodation" (Hileman, 1991).

The United States Senate passed the Indoor Air Quality Act, though it never got through the House of Representatives (Hileman, 1991).

The chemical industry was used to problems around their factories, so they placed them in areas where people were poor and politicians could be bought. Now the complaints were about the products themselves and the complainers were often highly educated.

It looked like a storm was gathering.

The CMA briefing paper

In 1990 the Chemical Manufacturers Association produced the "*Environmental Illness*" *Briefing Paper*. It was intended for their members only, but a copy was leaked to the MCS community (Credon, 1990).

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 author 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.

MCS 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 (California Legislature, 1984; Blonien, 1984).

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,” it suggests insurance companies, the pesticide/herbicide industry, food industry, auto industry, aerospace industry, cleaning agent industry, homebuilders and many more. It then states:

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... 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.

This paper was a call for action to fight the acceptance of MCS, and the call was apparently heeded.

The meeting

A meeting to discuss the MCS problem was organized by the industry lobby group the American Petroleum Institute (API, 1990; Hileman, 1991).

It was held on November 7 and 8, 1990 and was titled "Perspective on Environmental Illness: an industry forum."

Nothing of what happened there leaked out to the MCS community, but the brief invitation to the meeting listed four invited speakers. They were a lobbyist from the Chemical Manufacturer's Association, a lawyer from the Mobil oil company, a director from the insurance company Aetna, and an allergist. The allergist publicly claimed that MCS "constitutes a belief and not a disease" (Terr, 1987) and was regularly hired by various insurance companies to evaluate whether MCS patients were disabled or not (Terr, 1986, 1989).

Forbes magazine

The new anti-MCS tone in the media appeared to start with a front-page article in the July 8, 1991, issue of *Forbes* magazine (Huber, 1991).

It compares MCS with tabloid stories of Princess Diana having an affair with Elvis Presley, and similar questionable ideas. One graphic shows a man freaking out when seeing the smoke plume from a large factory.

It uses strong language and the term "chemical AIDS" throughout the article, such as in:

... it's politically convenient for chemophobes to embrace the junk science of chemical AIDS.

This may be the first use of the term "junk science," which basically means any science that threatens corporate or political interests.

The article derides some other issues that have since become more accepted, such as the chemical PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl). It also stated that health effects from power lines was a new and pending issue.

The article ends comparing lawsuits with witch hunts and the Spanish Inquisition.

The Chemical & Engineering News article

Just two weeks after the *Forbes* article, 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 (Hileman 1991).

It is a landmark article that describes the situation in 1991, where the issue had become so emotionally charged in the medical community 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 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.

Industry front groups join in

The American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) published two anti-MCS booklets, one was titled *Unproved "Allergies": an Epidemic of Nonsense* (Barrett, 1993; Orne, 1991/1993). They also sent out a press release warning about "doctors cashing in on environmental illness" (ACSH, 1993).

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ACSH labeled itself as "nonprofit" and a "consumer education and public health institution directed and advised by over 200 prominent American physicians and scientists." However, *Consumer Reports* (1994) pointed out that ACSH had strong financial ties to the chemical industry and had argued in favor of many controversial products made by its funders, such as artificial sweeteners, growth hormones, urea formaldehyde foam insulation (UFFI), asbestos and various pesticides. (See also McGarity, 2008.)

Another organization was The Advancement of Sound Science Coalition (TASSC), which was created in 1993. When the state of New Mexico wanted to study whether MCS should be considered a disability, representatives of TASSC opposed the study by claiming enough had been done already (Carruthers, 1996a, 1996b).

TASSC is also known for its work opposing regulation of tobacco products and air pollution (Michaels, 2008; Davis, 2002: ch 7).

The Fall 1990 issue of the MCS newsletter *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.

The Environmental Sensitivities Research Institute (ESRI) was founded in 1995 by Ronald Gots who was also president of National Medical Advisory Service which assisted companies who were sued by people with MCS. At the ESRI kick-off meeting Gots described MCS as "a peculiar manifestation of our technophobic and chemophobic society" (Risk Policy Report, 1995a).

ESRI was clearly created specifically to fight acceptance of MCS. They did no research but focused on disseminating anti-MCS opinions in sponsored newspaper articles, court cases involving MCS and at various medical conferences. They also sent representatives to testify against MCS when legislatures debated funding research or accommodations for people with MCS (Donnay, 1997; McCampbell, 2001; Ashford, 1998).

ESRI was secretive about its membership and sponsors, but it is known that its board of directors included several representatives from the chemical industry (Donnay, 1997; McCampbell, 2001).

Another actor that showed up to oppose MCS was Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE), which was organized by the pesticide industry, including Monsanto, Sandoz Agro, DowElanco, Dupont Agricultural Products and others (McCampbell, 1996, 2001; Rachel, 1995).

RISE sponsored a 1995 seminar on MCS. One of the speakers was the managing director of ESRI (Rachel, 1995).

Paid for editorials?

At this time it was rather common for medical scientists to be paid large sums of money to promote the interests of corporations. This included editorials, public speaking, research grants and more (Angell, 2000).

The tobacco industry paid at least nine scientists to write letters to journals and newspapers supporting tobacco. They were paid up to \$10,000 for each letter, which were often reviewed by company attorneys (Kaiser, 1998).

One scientist was contacted by a public relations firm and offered \$2500 for a letter he didn't have to write himself, but would be published in his name. He refused and instead published the story (Brennan, 1994).

Whether these types of arrangements were also used in the campaign to discredit people with MCS is unknown. By nature, such payments are kept secret.

Heavy handed tactics

In 1992 the city of Oakland, California, wanted to make their public meetings accessible to people with MCS. They intended to include a brief statement on their meeting notices asking people to voluntarily refrain from wearing perfumes in the room. The city was "hammered" by industry lobbyists and gave up on the idea (Hamilton, 1994).

Television turns negative

The tone in some media turned very negative. The American Broadcasting Corporation created several television programs dismissive of chemical pollution concerns and MCS. These included the programs *Allergic to living* and *Allergic to the world*.

In one program, the journalist asks "How does it feel to be getting money [disability] for a nonexistent condition?" (Lipson, 2004).

For one of these anti-MCS programs, they attempted to entrap the MCS specialist, Dr. Grace Ziem, but it backfired (Carter, 1996a, 1996b).

The executive producer of most of these programs was married to a chemical industry PR agent, according to the watchdog Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (Grossman, 1994).

When the federal government built a special apartment building for people with MCS, it was mocked by ABCs "house doctor" on a news program, as well as by the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Reactor, 1994; Epstein, 1994).

The Baltimore symposium

A medical symposium was held over three days in the fall of 1995. It was co-sponsored by Johns Hopkins University/NIOSH, The International Society of Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology and the National Medical Advisory Service.

The National Medical Advisory Service had numerous times helped corporations fight people sickened by MCS in the courts. It shared both staff and offices with ESRI (mentioned above) and supplied the co-chair, symposium coordinator and an additional moderator for the symposium (MCSRR, 1995a).

The symposium was stacked with speakers who were biased against MCS. This included several of the usual physicians, as well as two lawyers who had assisted several corporations to fight MCS claims. There were also speakers from the Dow-Elanco chemical manufacturer and the Aetna insurance company (Symposium Agenda, 1995; MCSRR, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c; Risk Policy Report, 1995b).

A similar symposium was held in 1993, but very little information about it has survived.

Changing the name of MCS

Another stacked meeting was held in Berlin in 1996. Here a new name for MCS was coined to distance it from the chemical causes and make the illness sound more psychological. The new name was: idiopathic environmental intolerance.

The coup-like meeting was protested by the scientific community, including the chairman of the meeting. As a result, the World Health Organization did not adopt the new name, though it became widely used by those opposing MCS (Abrams, 1996; Ashford, 1998: ch 9; Wilson, 1996; EI Wellspring, 2020).

The result of the campaign

Falsely painting people with MCS as crazy was a masterstroke. It gives politicians, doctors, journalists and regular people license to ignore anything a person with the illness says. If an activist speaks up at a public hearing, the people sitting on the dais simply disregard what is said – after all it is just the ramblings of a crazy person there at the microphone, they think.

By the middle 1990s, progress for MCS halted. Government agencies and others that had been in communication with the MCS activists stopped returning phone calls.

Funding for medical research dried up. Scientists who wanted to study MCS were told that "everybody knows" MCS is all psychological, so it doesn't make sense to spend money on research (Meggs, 2017).

The U.S. Congress and Department of Veterans Affairs allocated funding in 1994 to build and operate an environmental control unit at a university. This was a crucial facility needed to prove MCS was a "legitimate" illness. But the money was simply never released, with no reason given (Twombly, 1994; Ashford, 1998: ch 8). An effective way to prevent unpleasant scientific results is to make sure there is no funding for it.

A 2018 study found only 320 MCS research articles published in medical journals, while there were 7453 articles about chronic fatigue syndrome and 9846 about fibromyalgia (Hu, 2018). Those two diseases are also controversial, but not a threat to powerful special interests.

The last medical conference about MCS was held in 2001. It had sixteen presentations, of which only four did not advance some form of psychological explanation (Kipen, 2002; Hu, 2018).

To what degree this remarkable turnaround was orchestrated by the unseen hand of the chemical industry is unknown. By nature, such campaigns are kept secret.

Documentation of the cigarette industry's efforts to suppress the truth about tobacco was leaked to the press by an insider, which is how the world found out. Unfortunately, very little has leaked out about the efforts to discredit MCS.

Discrediting those who got sick by falsely claiming they are mentally ill is not a new tactic. It was also done against people who were sickened by asbestos (Castleman, 1996).

There are many other well-documented stories about how special interests have fought inconvenient truths – and were often successful. These are stories about Orwellian-named front groups, science-for-hire, captured politicians and agencies, and different forms of harassment of the scientists who discovered the chemicals produced serious health effects. The well-known examples involved leaded gasoline, asbestos, cigarettes, ozone-destroying freon and climate change, but most of these stories are not commonly known (McGarity, 2008; Michaels, 2008; Oreskes, 2010; Smith, 2009, Davis, 2002).

A few of these sordid stories have been made into Hollywood films, such as *Erin Brockovich* (2000) and *Dark Waters* (2019). These stories are small potatoes compared to the stakes on both sides of the MCS acceptance.

The campaign today

The campaign was so successful that not much has happened in the past twenty years. The TASSC and ESRI organizations have disbanded, the other front groups work on other issues.

It is only occasionally they raise their voices against MCS, like when in 2011 the Monell Chemical Senses Center called fragrance sensitivities "anxieties" that are promoted by some doctors (CMAJ, 2011). The Monell Center claims it is "independent," though their website admits they have more than fifty corporate sponsors from various chemical industry sectors (Monell, 2020).

But when the day comes that MCS again starts to be taken seriously, there is no doubt the campaign will quickly resurface in some form. And it will be done slyly again, hiding who stands behind it. Billions of dollars are at stake, while the cost of fighting the truth is much much cheaper.

Meanwhile, the media occasionally perpetuates the established myth that people with MCS are simply mentally ill. One example was published by *The Guardian*, which created the myth that there are typically two suicides a year in the MCS

community in Snowflake, Arizona (Hale, 2016). The myth has since been repeated in other media. (There were two suicides the year before their visit, but that was a one-time event.)

Also notable is an article in the conservative tabloid *New York Post*, which featured a model photo of a fearful man wearing a mask and a tinfoil hat (Laneri, 2020).

Other MCS history articles

www.eiwellspring.org/history.html

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