

Risk Policy Report

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In the News

NEW MULTIPLE CHEMICAL SENSITIVITIES RESEARCH GROUP FORMED

With claims of harm from very low chemical exposures emerging as an increasingly significant issue for manufacturers, insurers, and other business sectors, a broad spectrum of industries gathered this week to kick off a new Environmental Sensitivities Research Institute (ESRI).

The institute is being formed to "proactively" respond to the rising number of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) cases and is expected to offer a center to which companies, attorneys, the media, and individuals can turn for information on the issue.

Establishment of the new group by the National Medical Advisory Service (NMAS) was prompted by concern that MCS claims are continuing to grow, even though, in the eyes of critics, the claims are based on "junk science" and undefined symptoms that are blamed on low chemical exposures.

According to Dr. Ronald E. Gots, President of NMAS and Executive Director of the newly founded ESRI, there has never been a medical issue that has brought together so many diverse interests — manufacturers of chemicals and fragrances, engineers and those responsible for maintaining air quality in buildings, insurers, and others. Gots, who regards MCS not as a disease but as a "phenomenon," in his opening remarks to attendees at the June 13-14 meeting, described MCS sufferers as "a group united by symptoms, looking for a cause."

According to *[MCS] At Work*, a 1993 "training workbook for working people" published by The Labor Institute of New York City, there is "no clear-cut definition" of MCS, a "controversial health problem." Some physicians "don't even regard MCS as a medical condition," the workbook says. "But in the meantime, people are getting sick." Symptoms include headache, fatigue, nausea, dizziness, and "severe systemic reactions," the workbook notes, and suggests that an estimated 15 percent of the population may be sensitive to chemicals in their workplaces or homes.

Gots, however, in a paper presented at the meeting, describes MCS as "a peculiar manifestation of our technophobic and chemophobic society," and, "in essence, a label given to people who do not feel well for a variety of reasons and who share the common belief that chemical sensitivities are to blame." The American Academy of Allergy and Immunology, the American Medical Association, the California Medical Association, and the American College of Physicians have rejected MCS "as an established organic disease," according to Gots' paper. Gots also describes MCS as "a dangerous diagnosis" that leads to the isolation of sufferers from an active life.

Providing an insurance industry perspective on MCS, William Boyd of USF&G Insurance Company noted that "insurance companies see claims of MCS every day." In Boyd's view, insurance underwriters and claims adjusters are mismanaging the issue because they are unfamiliar with exposure assessment and with the basic tenet of toxicology that "the right dose differentiates a poison and a remedy." Boyd's company currently has 196 claims based on chemical exposures, most of them MCS, in such areas as silica, chemical soups, sick building, paints, formaldehyde, benzene, toxic cloud, and carbon monoxide.

"This is just the beginning, the tip of the iceberg," according to an attorney in the audience, who said plaintiff attorneys are actively looking for new claims. Boyd suggested that in some cases the insurance industry is perpetuating the MCS phenomenon by making payments to "get out of this," rather than taking a hard line and refusing to make payments for claims that are not "legitimate."