

# **Backyard Secret Exposed**

## **by Beth Sturdivant**

### *Book Review*

**A personal story about what it is like to be stricken with electrical sensitivity (EHS) and how confusing it is to navigate the jungle of alternative treatments, gadgets, myths and snake oil**

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Beth Sturdivant was 38 years old, owner and operator of two sandwich restaurants, wife, mother of two teenagers. She has always been healthy and full of energy, but in 2009 she suddenly got a lot of unexplainable symptoms, including severe headaches, mental fog, frequent retching, burning skin and intolerance to light and sound. She rapidly gained 30 pounds (15 kg) in just a few months. The family had moved into a newly built house right next to a giant electrical transmission line that towered over their home.

Thus starts a journey looking for a cure, like it has happened for many others stricken with environmental illnesses. The family sells their two Hummer SUVs and one of their Subway sandwich restaurants to finance the treatments, which eventually include Dr. Lieberman's environmental clinic in Charleston, South Carolina, Dr. William Rea's in Dallas and a brain center in rural Idaho.

As is so common among people who are sick and desperate to find anything that will help, Beth buys a lot of gadgets and alternative treatments. This includes some very dubious remedies, such as a drink she buys from England that should protect her against radiation. She also buys a lot of those "magical" pendants that are claimed to somehow protect people against EMF.

Beth's extended family rallies to help her out. They let her stay in their homes and travel with her to the various clinics she visits. Her husband is the only one who is not supportive as he seems to have a hard time with it all. It is hard on their marriage.

Beth is determined to be there for her children and steels herself to attend various functions. Her daughter is the first person in her extended family to get a college degree and Beth is able to attend the graduation.

The book never mentions multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) though many people with EHS also have MCS and there are some pointers that MCS is part of the picture. The family moved into their house when it was completely new and Beth gets sick every time she tallies the receipts from their restaurants, as the receipts are on chemically treated paper. She also spent six weeks detoxing in Charleston. On the other hand, she likes essential oils, which most people with MCS abhor.

The book is an interesting read, as it is a diary that vividly describes what it is like to be stricken with an illness that is poorly understood and how confusing it is to look for a cure. The diary format creates a lot of repetitive statements, but it also tells us what is on her mind a lot, such as her husband, her children, and her weight. The format also tells us how excited she is every time she tries something new that she is so hopeful will help, even though a few pages later on we hear she is worse than ever. Unfortunately, that makes it look like she endorses a lot of gadgets that don't actually seem to work for her.

Beth comes across as a rather headstrong and hard driving personality. She frequently states that she has done a lot of research about EMF and that she considers herself very knowledgeable. Unfortunately, what she considers research apparently consists of looking at opinions on the web and what she considers science consists of her own subjective feelings. The book is marred by so many myths she picked up from dubious web sites.

On page 38 we are told that they open the doors of the house to let the EMF out. The reality is that doors and walls do not keep EMF inside, unless the whole house (doors, walls, roof, etc.) are all of metal. Even in that case it makes very little difference whether the doors are open or not. On page 114 we are told that smaller houses are worse for trapping EMFs inside! On page 131 she says that compact fluorescent light (CFL) bulbs “emit radiation in the air because of the mercury inside the glass.” (it's the built-in power supply that generates EMF, the mercury emits ultraviolet light and is otherwise only dangerous if the bulb breaks).

She mentions Faraday cages three times (pages 57, 97, 117) and none of them correctly. A Faraday cage is a physical structure, built entirely of metal, that completely covers all six sides of a person. On page 57 she mentions some gadget that “helped with the vortex up to 100 feet in each direction” as a “Faraday cage.” No explanation of what she considers a “vortex” and the 100 feet sounds like some hype she is just echoing.

On page 114 she says: “When the wind blew, a lot of the dirty electricity would be circulating in the air, further irritating my condition.” Of course, EMF is no more affected by the wind than sunlight is, including EMF coming from wires carrying dirty electricity. And electricity doesn’t travel in the air, except as lightning.

She likes to invent her own words, rather than learning what things are really called. An example is her frequent mention of “wifi towers” rather than “cell towers” or “base stations.” Wi-Fi signals are rarely transmitted from outdoor towers.

She is a big proponent of various “EMF protection” gadgets (or “diodes”) even though they don’t really seem to help. What little help she senses may simply be the placebo effect as she spent a lot of money on them and desperately wants to feel better. Testing them this way cannot be called science, and testing these things scientifically has only produced very questionable results, if any at all. Desperate people have been easy prey for snake oil throughout human history and that clearly includes Beth.

Her formal education is as a hairdresser, and apparently nobody in her extended family has any technical education, so it is easy to see why there is a lack of skepticism towards all the myths and no understanding what science really is. They are simply a typical family trying to deal with a big problem with little competent help.

The best advice Beth gives is to stay grounded, which has actually been helpful to several people. However, she does it by plugging herself into the ground on electrical outlets. This can be dangerous if the outlet is not wired correctly. Most outlets do not provide good grounding anyway, as they often carry a low voltage and high-frequency “dirty-electricity” (hospitals use specially grounded electrical outlets to avoid such problems). It is much better to use a sturdy tent peg hammered directly into the soil, go barefoot or even lay directly on the ground.

The book otherwise has little value as a self-help guide. Beth rarely provides any specifics, such as not telling us which essential oils she likes or which “diodes” she feels are helpful. That is probably good, since none of those products seem to really help her anyway. It is very common for people with EHS to have good and bad days for no apparent reason. Newbies, like Beth, may not realize this and attribute her good days to whatever gadget she is currently trying

The book really needs an editor and it should be updated to explicitly tell the reader that the gadgets she started using with such great hope really didn’t help

after all, rather than letting the reader figure it out. And, please, weed out all the EMF myths, or qualify them with “we thought” or “we believed.” There are a lot of beliefs presented as facts.

If readers of this book believe a lot of the myths it tells, that can cause a real harm. A reader may present them as fact to someone who knows better, such as representatives for a utility company. To them it will be as if someone insists that the Earth is flat or the moon is made of green cheese, and they will not take anything else said seriously. It is only in politics that fundamental science is a matter of opinion.

An informed reader, who is skeptical about EHS, will be even more skeptical after reading this book.

The value of this book is the description of how difficult and confusing it is to get this disease, and how poorly the medical system is capable of assisting the EHS patients. How they are left to fend for themselves in the jungle of alternative treatments, bad information on the web and bogus gadgets, before finding some help from the few physicians available, such as Drs. Lieberman and Rea. But someone new to this illness would not know how confused Beth is and might take all her ill-founded comments as good information.

Beth’s story is believable, as others have had similar experiences (including this reviewer, who has even been to Dr. Rea’s clinic several times). It is just how Beth interprets and explains EMFs, and her recommendations of any gadget she has barely tried, that mars the book.

In the end, Beth does not find a cure. She does get better, but is not healed. The question is whether all the treatments she tried were beneficial or it simply helped to move out of the toxic new house, and stay away from the big power line for long enough.