

“Other Sensitivities” – What is That?

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“Allergies and other sensitivities” were themes at the congress of the Swedish Society of Medicine in Örebro in 1983. Since then a number of symptoms, disorders, conditions and diseases with more or less pronounced similarities to the classic allergic diseases have been included in the category “other sensitivities”. In the beginning it was believed that some of them were IgE-mediated but so far this has not been proven.

For example some of our dermatological patients complain of unspecific symptoms (dryness, redness, stinging, etc.) but there is often a discrepancy between subjective symptoms and objective signs and there are no tests available to verify their history. They feel misunderstood and distrusted by the medical profession and often consult more than one specialist.

Since the number of patients with these rather unspecific symptoms was steadily increasing, along with their disappointment in the health care system and intensive discussions in the mass media, including demands for more active measures, two organisations, Vårdalstiftelsen and Folkhälsoinstitutet, initiated a project in 1999 aimed at more thoroughly defining these “new” conditions, their relationship to the classic allergic diseases, and their causes, mechanisms, treatment, prognosis and prevention as well as suggestions for future research.

The results of the study have now been published under the title *From Witchcraft to Science* and a copy of the report (in Swedish) can be obtained from Vårdalstiftelsen, Box 3210, 103 64 Stockholm.

Based on a questionnaire sent to approximately 350 institutions and scientists, 11 areas with claimed relation to “other sensitivities” were selected and further explored. Scientists performing frontline research in these areas were asked to contribute by presenting surveys covering the aspects mentioned, presenting them at hearings and discussing them with other invited specialists.

The following symptoms, conditions, disorders are covered in the report: airway hyper-responsiveness; asthma-like symptoms; sensory hyperreactivity; sick building syndrome; multiple chemical sensitivity; sensitivity to electricity, electromagnetic fields and visual display units; food sensitivity and intolerance; irritant contact dermatitis; fibromyalgia; chronic fatigue syndrome and symptoms related to amalgam exposure.

The surveys, summaries of the discussion at the hearings and other aspects, conclusions and recommendations from the work group give us up-to-date information on these so called new conditions. Some chapters are mostly relevant to practising dermatologists, e.g. irritant contact dermatitis, food sensitivity, symptoms related to exposure to amalgam and visual display units, but the report also gives us a better understanding of the mysterious symptoms and complaints that patients present, an understanding which hopefully will lead to better and more adequate management in the future.