

“THE PLAGUE”

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Medically unexplained symptoms (MUS) are physical symptoms without any organic findings when investigated. These types of symptoms make up half of primary care consultation and half of new referrals to secondary care. Because of the wide range of symptoms, such patients are seen across a number of specialities. Patients with MUS are very costly as they are frequent users of services and undergo large number of investigations. Medically unexplained symptoms include features such as fatigue causing profound reduction in activity, malaise, muscle and joint pains, subjective feverishness, dizziness, visual disturbances, problems with memory and numerous bowel symptoms as in the irritable bowel syndrome. In 1983, Epstein-Barr virus was blamed, and when this was found to be untrue, alternative viruses were hypothesised as the cause including human herpes virus 6 and Enterovirus. Attention then turned to the immune system and parallels were drawn with AIDS. These symptoms of MUS and the debate over the cause may appear to be a “disease of the 90s” but review of the medical literature from 1869 onwards shows that such symptoms engendered just as much controversy in the past, with the same contention between psychological and physical causes. Whereas in the 1990s, viruses and the immune system were the dominant cultural phenomena, in the 19th Century, electricity, conservation of energy, evolution and heredity were the dominant models. Looking back at the controversies of the past illustrates that this collection of symptoms will be ascribed to whatever the dominant scientific trend of the time is unless the basic neurophysiology can be elucidated.

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