

Are environmental medicine problems relevant in Switzerland?

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Summary

Background and aim: In Switzerland, the prevalence of health problems attributed to environmental exposures is unknown, and views differ regarding its magnitude. In the present study we investigated the frequency of environmentally related health problems amongst the patients of Swiss sentinel physicians and assessed symptoms and suspected environmental exposures.

Methods: During 2002, nearly 250 “Swiss Sentinel Surveillance Network” physicians were asked to record the number of patients presenting with environmental health problems and to complete a questionnaire inquiring about suspected environmental exposures and health problems. Physicians offering “alternative” medical therapies also participated in the study. The results were compared with the experience of a Basel University pilot project which evaluated patients with environment-related health problems simultaneously from the medical, psychiatric and environmental viewpoint.

Results: 354 environment-related consultations were reported by 72 physicians, corresponding to 0.03% of all sentinel-physician consultations. There were considerable differences both within the group of Sentinella physicians, and between physicians offering “alternative” medical therapies and the Sentinella physicians, in the frequency of environmentally-related consultations, the character of the reported symptoms and the suspected environmental exposures.

Conclusion: Overall, environmental medicine consultations in general practice were rare. However, experience of the environmental medicine pilot project showed that concerned persons seek help from various health care providers and from environmental agencies. Effective treatment should include counselling by medical, psychiatric and environmental professionals.

Key words: *Sentinella; environmental medicine; counselling*

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Introduction

In Switzerland, the prevalence of persons with health problems attributed to environmental exposures is unknown. No peer-reviewed studies have been published, but according to some of the self-help pages for “multiple chemical sensitivities” (MCS) groups (www.mcs-liga.ch) or persons who ascribe their health problems to electromagnetic fields (www.gigahertz.ch), for example, there are thousands of individuals in Switzerland who are concerned. These figures suggest that health problems due to environmental exposure are an important issue in the health sector. US studies have reported that 3.9% of the population in a cross-sectional

study in California had daily symptoms of chemical sensitivity [1]. A study in North Carolina reported 6.3% of the population with doctor-diagnosed “environmental illness” or “MCS” [2].

What do people do when they feel that their health problems are caused by environmental exposures? In contrast to other countries [3–5], Switzerland does not offer environmental medicine counselling within an institutional structure. While some people see their doctor about such conditions, others may seek advice from an environmental agency, e.g. agencies responsible for chemical safety or air hygiene.