

C Nimnuan, S Wessely et al. Journal of Psychosomatic Research. July (2001) Vol. 51 #1 p 361.

Medical practitioners often find that a significant proportion of their caseload remains difficult to diagnose, symptoms persist with no apparent medical cause. There is a growing belief that symptomatology may not always be explained by pathology and that attendance at clinic may have more to do with feelings of being unable to cope than illness or injury.

If such a belief is confirmed, and the working age population is involved, there are many potential consequences.

This study examined the case notes of consecutive referrals to gastroenterology, gynaecology, neurology, rheumatology, chest, cardiology, and dentistry. All subjects were aged 16 to 65 yrs old.

Cases were allowed to develop for 3 months following first examination, in case an underlying pathology became apparent.

52% of all cases had at least one unexplained symptom. The highest rate was in gynaecology the lowest in dental.

Those who were successful in obtaining referrals to specialists tend to insist there must be a physical cause.

Female gender seems to be a risk factor for somatisation.

The authors conclude that somatisation, distressing enough to seek specialist help, is commonplace and may even be the majority of work in some specialisms.

Comment

Medical specialists tend to have problems dealing with unexplained symptoms and are very reluctant to invoke a psychological explanation. This has the tendency to reinforce the patient's belief in a physical cause. In turn this leads to endless seeking out of a specialist who can provide an accurate diagnosis, when in practice it would seem more useful to concentrate on learning to cope.

Further work is needed on identification of predisposition to somatisation, however, if they really are a reaction to an inability to cope, the links with stress at work will become apparent.

The literature continues to attract letters from people who find an accurate diagnosis after years of "indifferent advice" from medics. It is not clear whether the pathology always preceded the symptoms in these cases.

Symptoms it would seem, are not necessarily evidence of pathology.
