

May 8, 2004

Shreveport Times
Guest Editorial

Maryann Spurgin's excellent and informative opinion piece on chronic fatigue syndrome that appeared in the May 8 edition of *The Times* prompts me to write about my experience with environmental illness—chronic fatigue syndrome being a symptom of that illness.

Ten years ago I was a vibrant, energetic woman with a thriving psychotherapy practice. I was optimistic, enthusiastic, and took great pleasure and pride in my work. However, seven years earlier I had cosmetic surgery that included a silicone chin implant and immediately developed rashes and allergies. I became very sensitive to cigarette smoke, automobile exhaust, perfume, and most household chemicals. But I was functional. I never made the association between the silicone chin implant and these symptoms since the surgeon assured me the implant was perfectly safe. Although many people who have silicone implants experience no negative side effects, some become seriously chronically ill.

Then in November of 1993, while remodeling my house, I became ill with flu-like symptoms (joint pain, muscle weakness, malaise, a sore throat, cough). I also developed burning skin, rashes, irritability, mental confusion, memory impairment, and depression. I never got well.

From 1993 to 1999 I went to 22 different physicians, desperately seeking a cure. I had many different diagnoses and treatment plans, took countless medications, but became progressively sicker. Fatigue was so great that there were days on end when it

took all my effort to bathe. Then I'd have to rest for a few hours before I could brush my teeth. I didn't have the strength to lift a glass so we used plastic glasses and only half filled the glass.

I was so cognitively impaired toward the end of my practice, which I closed in October of 1998, that I had a great deal of difficulty figuring out how to schedule an appointment.

I felt lost, isolated, misunderstood, and worst of all, no physician seemed to be able to help me. In my desperation, I became suicidal. My devoted husband understood my desire to end my life, but urged me to see just one more doctor. Fortunately, I found William J. Rea, M. D. at the Environmental Health Center—Dallas. Dr. Rea is a world-renowned authority on environmental illness and [REDACTED] chemical sensitivity. He also has environmental illness and 30 years ago began research on treating the illness. He has written four major medical texts and over 100 articles on this illness. Patients come to Dallas from all over the world—Hong Kong, Australia, Germany, Canada, and Africa—to be treated by him.

Regretfully, there are only a handful of physicians in the United States who treat patient with environmental illness and chronic fatigue syndrome. Most doctors know nothing about the illness, much less how it should be treated.

Treatment is intensive: weekly IVs with vitamins and minerals (since chemically injured people generally have malabsorption and need extra amino acids to help with detoxification), supplements, antigen injections, sauna to sweat out toxins, organic foods simply prepared, and oxygen therapy. Avoiding chemicals in the home, outdoors, and in all places that we visit that are toxic to the chemically sensitive is also important. For

instance, I can only clean my house with borax, hydrogen peroxide, and baking soda. I use no pesticides, herbicides, or insecticides in my environment.

I learned that my immune system became impaired trying to rid my body of the silicone, and when I was exposed to a blast of chemicals during the remodeling of my house—formaldehyde, pressure treated lumber containing arsenic, solvents, paints, and chemicals in carpeting—I developed severe symptoms, my detoxification system became seriously impaired, and I became toxic from the chemical overload. I became increasingly more ill as my body lost the ability to repair itself. Although the initial chemical insult varies, in the end, we all present with similar symptoms—the same symptoms as veterans with Gulf War Syndrome.

Through my experience, and the experience of countless other patients, I've learned that there is a stigma about this illness. I believe most people think we are phobic and mentally ill; however, many patients with environmental illness, which includes chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, and multiple chemical sensitivity, develop psychiatric symptoms (depression, irritability, memory loss, and confusion) as a result of the illness. We are depressed *because* we are ill; we are not ill because we are depressed.

It is my hope to provide education to health care professionals so that when patients presents with my symptoms, they will be referred to a physician who can provide effective treatment. Had I had such a referral, I'd be well today.