

Scratching to Death

The celebrated singer, Joni Mitchell, has been admitted to hospital after being found unconscious. Miss Mitchell is reported to be suffering from Morgellons Disease, a condition that was scarcely known at the turn of the century. While the circumstances that led to her admission are not clear, there is much to say about Morgellons, a good example of how illness is as much a cultural and social matter as it is of disease – the substance of which can be seen under a microscope or in a pathology bottle.

The first thing to note about Morgellons is its eponymous title. This distinction is usually held by venerable disorders, long recognised by their original titles, such as Parkinson's or Huntington's disease. It used to be one of the fun things of medical study (actually, the only thing); my favourite is the Sister Joseph nodule. Most eponymous conditions however are syndromes – symptom clusters that have not received recognition as diseases.

Morgellons received its title from Mary Leita, whose two-year old son complained of bugs in his skin. Leita, a former laboratory technician, examined the sores and found multi-coloured fibres. Then followed a trek around the medical profession, seeing a number of specialists who were adamant there was nothing abnormal, one particularly witless doctor going so far as to suggest Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy, as good a way as any to provoke a defensive and adversarial behaviour in the patient.

Spurning the profession that had dismissed her, Leitao embarked on a lengthy search before finding a reference by Sir Thomas Browne in 1656. Browne described an epidemial (sic) distemper in Lanquedoc children called the morgellons who break out with harsh hairs on their backs. To some this might be drawing a very long bow, but such distinctions seldom trouble the illness-convinced.

Morgellons consists of primarily of skin symptoms such as crawling, biting, and stinging sensations – which achieves the nice medical term of formication – fibres or shreds in the skin, and skin lesions like rashes or sores. After this it becomes associated with a range of systemic changes, mostly tiredness, poor concentration, memory loss and mood swings.

These symptoms are of interest as they coincide with another contentious condition, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. In fact, both Morgellons and CFS sufferers follow a similar trajectory. Its adherents are intensely militant, propagating their beliefs on the internet and reacting with intense hostility, even threats of violence, to any authorities who challenge their views of the illness.

To the chagrin of Morgellons patients, all investigations, tests and studies have failed to reveal any cause for the condition. Insect infestation, their explanation for the condition, has been specifically excluded. The specks, fibres, hairs, clumps or nodules they carefully collect and bring to consultations have been found to be non-organic material, such as dust specks or lint. In some cases, other skin disorders are present.

Leitao's Morgellons Research Foundation, which attracted a legion of self-diagnosed supporters, lobbied the US Congress and the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to investigate the condition. Unfortunately, the CDC study rejected the possibility of any infestation or organic illness and decided that Morgellons was "similar to more commonly recognized conditions such as delusional infestation". A Mayo Clinic study reached the same conclusion, adding that about two thirds of skin biopsies showed nothing more than dermatitis, the least you would expect with all the pulling, scratching and fiddling that goes with the condition.

There is an absolute consensus among dermatologists, pathologists, microbiologists, entomologists and psychiatrists that Morgellons' victims are suffering from delusion parasitosis: the psychotic belief that they are infested with insects, parasites or other agents.

To no great surprise, Morgellons patients reject these explanations. Such rebuttals only reinforce their belief that they are being victimised or stigmatised as crazy and easily morphs into vast conspiracy theories which become increasingly bizarre. They engage in tendentious, if not dangerous self-treatment, using powerful chemicals to extirpate the alleged infestation, thereby ensuring the situation is made worse by secondary inflammation.

Delusional parasitosis, a condition with a long history, has acquired a considerable literature. It was mostly known as Ekbom's syndrome, a subset of that deliciously named disorder, monosymptomatic

hypochondriacal psychosis. The joy killers in the DSM could not allow this piece of verbal felicity to survive, so we have to content ourselves with the unlovely term Body Dysmorphic Disorder, which extends to young men obsessed with body building.

Delusional parasitosis can occur spontaneously but has a number of causes; these include schizophrenia, dementia and drug abuse. Cocaine and amphetamines are especially prone to cause the feeling of insects crawling under the skin. There are treatments, chiefly antipsychotic drugs and antidepressants. However, the mere mention of a psychiatrist is enough to get the patient out of the room before you unwrap the prescription pad.

The Internet promotes the spreading and supporting of "bizarre" disease beliefs, because "a belief is not considered delusional if it is accepted by other members of an individual's culture or subculture." A supposed illness will dramatically increase as knowledge of its existence and possible cure spreads. Thanks to the efforts of of Leitao and the multiplying effect of the internet, there has been a drastic increase in the number of sufferers.

Morgellons is a potent example of the medicalization of ordinary distress, a phenomenon the medical profession is doing its best to encourage if the furore over the DSM-5 is any indication. By attaining the validation of an illness, one achieves the status of a victim, instead of having to put up with everyday frustration, unhappiness, dissatisfaction or disdain.

There are no longer patients, only consumers, clients, sufferers, victims and illness communities. The careful accretion by trial, error and experimentation over the last few centuries leading to a scientific medicine is swept aside by the self-sustaining delusions fed by 'Doctor Google', a million reckless ill informed and rebarbative websites and the shallow insistent keening that if someone 'feels' something, it makes it real, everything that contradicts this counts for nothing.

If one wants to understand the personality of someone who behaves like this, a good place to look is the acting profession. It is not unknown that some thespians succeed more by looks than talent. In addition, they exemplify the shallow, self-obsessed ignorant narcissism that typifies the state. Miss Jenny McCarthy, whose ample assets are constantly on display, is an noisy promoter of the untenable belief that vaccination causes autism and never misses the opportunity to publicise her essentially batbrained ideas (one uses this word with caution here), regardless of the consequences for those children who die unnecessarily of preventable infections.

The best example we have of this phenomenon is *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder*, a condition that since its official declination in 1980 has become the Apple Computer of psychiatric disorder, expanding into every aspect of daily life, to the extent that therapists treating such patients can now claim to have vicarious PTSD.

One of course wishes Miss Mitchell well and hopes she will make a

good recovery. The likelihood of this occurring can be judged from the following quote:

My childhood was very difficult. I had every childhood disease and then some, but my parents didn't mollycoddle me. They left me to fight those battles on my own. I guess that was very Canadian, very stoic. But it's good. I had to become a warrior. I had to give up hope and find a substitute for hope that would be far more stable.

Miss Mitchell may have found what she was looking for but somehow I can't help feeling that I am on her parents' side.

Robert M Kaplan is a forensic psychiatrist, writer and speaker. His latest book is *The Prophet of Psychiatry: In Search of Reginald Ellery*.