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LANSING STATE JOURNAL

LANSING, MI

CIRC. 104,760

c4

MARCH 19 1998

Burnt-out blues

Chronic fatigue results from stress, but can be treated

By Tracey Birkenhauer
Lansing State Journal

Many doctors doubt it even exists, but patients who suffer from chronic fatigue syndrome know their problem is more than psychological.

Those who have it can be mildly inconvenienced by lethargy or completely incapacitated, unable to get out of bed in the morning.

"One of my patients was an active nurse, but with chronic fatigue now she has problems making a bed,"

said Dr. Edward Conley, an assistant clinical professor of medicine at Michigan State University and medical director of Flint's Fatigue Clinic of Michigan. "I've had patients wheeled in on



Conley

gurneys, who can only shower once every two weeks."

Even though thousands of Americans have been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome since the disorder was officially recognized in 1988, experts still don't agree on what CFS is or what causes it.

Even estimates on how many people have CFS vary widely, from a conservative guess of seven per 100,000 people to 200 per 100,000, said DePaul University psychologist Leonard Jason. But, he added, the

Chronic fatigue symptoms, according to Conley.

- Exhaustion
- About 50 percent decrease in daily functions
- Short-term memory or concentration problems
- Sore throat
- Tender lymph nodes in your upper arm, armpit or neck
- Multi-joint pain without joint swelling or redness
- Headaches of a new type, pattern or severity
- Non-refreshing sleep

definition of CFS is so vague that various surveys inevitably will produce different findings.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has defined chronic fatigue syndrome as the presence of at least four of eight specific symptoms, such as headaches, sore throat, muscle ache and fatigue after exertion. The duration must be for at least six months.

There is no diagnostic test, such as a blood test, for CFS.

"There are a lot of ambiguity and reliability problems in this definition," Jason said. "Many of these symptoms, such as fatigue and sore throat, are not unusual for people to have. It's a question of intensity."

To help patients better under-

stand what CFS is and how it's treated, Conley wrote "America Exhausted: Breakthrough Treatments of Fatigue and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome" (Vitality Press, \$14.95).

"It's not just for people with CFS, but for everybody with fatigue problems," Conley said.

The doctor's treatment plan first aims to obliterate any viruses patients have and considers their nutritional intake. His goal is to improve their energy production by giving their cells what they need to create energy, including vitamins, minerals and amino acids.

"It would be wonderful if we just had one pill," Conley said. "This is a deeper problem than that."

Conley blames stress for CFS.

"In my mind, stress is the No. 1 killer in the U.S. and a major cause of fatigue," he said.

Conley cites these points regarding everyday stress:

■ It's destructive in everyone — especially someone suffering from fatigue.

■ You can't control many of the things that happen to you, but you can control your reactions to them. This can reduce stress.

■ Meditate or pray daily to help reduce stress and reduce the production of the destructive chemicals that accompany it. The constant production of these chemicals — through stress — further injures the already damaged energy production system.

Many criteria for a CFS diagno-

sis, including depression, overlap with other disorders, said Dr. Monika Leitgeb, a family physician at Sparrow Family Health Center-West.

That makes it a difficult disorder for her to diagnose. Once she's certain she has the correct diagnosis, Leitgeb assures patients that CFS won't shorten their lifespan, but they'll have to work around the disease.

They can modify how many hours they spend at work, develop a mild exercise program and start eating more fruits, vegetables and multivitamins. If patients are depressed, she sends them for a psychiatric evaluation.

While many doctors mistakenly assume patients are suffering from depression and that's causing fatigue, Conley said he's found the antithesis to be true.

"With a vast majority of people I see, the symptoms of CFS are causing depression," Conley said.

"They're financially a mess because they can't work, they feel lousy all the time and they can't uphold the family obligations they'd like. They feel sick for months or years. It's like having a really bad case of the flu for five years.

"When you feel like that, you'll feel depressed."

Conley opened his chronic fatigue clinic 10 years ago after spending years treating Olympic athletes. He's seen more than 2,000 CFS patients, with about 600 active currently.

"Even to this day, people are being told there's nothing that can be done for this problem and there's a whole world of things that can be done," Conley said. "A lot of people have returned to normal lives."

