

## A CASE OF CHRONIC FATIGUE SYNDROME IN MALAYSIA

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**ABSTRACT:** A case of chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) like illness was identified recently. Diagnosis CFS is commonly used in the western countries but not in Malaysia or other parts of Asia. It is probably because the diagnosis of neurasthenia has gradually disappeared especially in the United States and United Kingdom. Neurasthenia is dropped in the DSM-111 and DSM-1V but is still retained in the 10th International Classification of Disease. This paper is reporting the case and discussing the definition of chronic fatigue syndrome. (*JUMMEC 2000; 2:103-104*)

**KEYWORDS:** fatigue, chronic fatigue syndrome, neurasthenia

### Introduction

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) is an unexplained clinical condition characterized by severe and disabling fatigue that affects both physical and mental functioning. In the medical world the concept of CFS has existed for a long time- only the label has changed. It was quoted that CFS is the 'disease of the fast paced 21st century' (1). In Malaysia, the diagnosis of CFS was not commonly used. This is probably the diagnosis of neurasthenia is still being accepted in this part of the world. Some authors viewed the diagnosis of chronic fatigue syndrome as a new wine in the old bottle (2). However, the definition of chronic fatigue syndrome has been reviewed in the United States (3), Australia (4) and United Kingdom (5). The prevalence estimates for chronic fatigue syndrome vary between 0.07% and 1.8% (6) and this probably reflects differences in case definition and sampling techniques between studies.

### Case report

A 43 years old married gentleman, who was a director in a private company, reported feeling of fatigue for the past one and a half year. It was a sudden in onset and severe enough to cause him to be unable to function at work place as well as socially. The fatigue was not as a result of ongoing exertion and rest could not relieve it. He also reported poor concentration, his mind was easily gone blank, and he felt sleepy all the time but had disturbed sleep at night. In the morning he felt unrefreshed and suffered from headache. He would feel tired for a long time if he exerted himself like hovering the house or driving outstation. There was

recurrent sore throat within the one and a half year episode together with muscle pain.

He attributed his fatigue as due to the multiple stresses he faced within 6 months prior to the onset of the illness. First the mother had stroke and later followed by his younger brother. His mother in law committed suicide that had affected his wife mostly. He also had some misunderstanding with his brother regarding the company. The patient did not report feeling depressed but admitted that feeling of frustration for not being able to function as before. He had no lost of interest or hopelessness but had many plans in his mind to do many things. His appetite was normal. He went for investigations but the results were all normal. He had no family history of mental illness and he described his premorbid personality as a perfectionist and orderliness. His mental status examination was normal except having difficulty in concentration. He was diagnosed as chronic fatigue syndrome and was started for cognitive behaviour therapy.

### Discussion

From the history, it was reported in 1750, Sir Richard Maningham published a treatise on febricula, describing its feature as including, "little low, continued fever, little transient chilliness, lassitude and weariness all over the body, little flying pains and sometimes the patient is a little delirious and forgetful. Subsequently in the first

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half of the 19th century, George Beard coined the term 'neurasthenia' to signify the lack of strength of the nerves that he believed to underlie cases of chronic fatigue (7). However, further studies could not find the evidence that peripheral nerves weakness or cerebral exhaustions as the origin of neurasthenia. Hence, the diagnosis of neurasthenia gradually disappeared, especially in the United States and United Kingdom and it was dropped from the DSM-III (8), the American diagnostic criteria for mental illness. The term is still being used in other part of the world, and is retained in the International Classification of Disease (ICD-9 and ICD-10).

In 1956, an article in *Lancet* (9) coined the term 'myalgic encephalitis' after a series of epidemic outbreaks of a contagious condition, which presented with neurological signs and symptoms, accompanied by myalgia and signs of emotional distress. Up to now the term is still being accepted in the United Kingdom to signify chronic fatigue. During the 1980's many doctors used the term Post-viral Fatigue Syndrome, as it frequently followed an apparent viral infection (10). However, the realization that viruses were unlikely to underlie all cases of chronic fatigue, the label needed to be changed.

**Table 1.** The Oxford Definition of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

1. Principal symptom is a fatigue with definite onset and not life long
2. Fatigue is severe, disabling, and affects physical and mental functioning
3. Fatigue for at least 6 months, during which it is present at least 50% of the time
4. Other symptoms may be included, such as: Myalgia, Mood disturbance, Sleep irregularity
5. Medical and psychiatric exclusions:  
Established medical condition known to produce chronic fatigue  
Schizophrenia  
Manic depressive illness  
Substance abuse  
Eating disorder  
Organic brain disease

The center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) convened a working group to establish a case definition as chronic fatigue syndrome to highlight what was felt to be the most consistent and significant manifestation of the illness and to avoid the use of aetiologically biased modifiers that were not applicable to all cases (3). A further definition of CFS was proposed by Lloyd and colleagues in Australia and retained the name "chronic fatigue syndrome" (4). In 1991 the British doctors proposed a new set of criteria that became known as the 'Oxford' criteria (Table 1)(5).

Therefore the case reported did fulfill the criteria for chronic fatigue syndrome. This may be evidence that CFS exists in Malaysia. The diagnosis of CFS should be recommended even though it is not in the mental disorder classifications.

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