

Morgellons Data Review from the Internet, the Media, Medical Journals and a Case Report

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Description

The Morgellons website effectively operates as an online headquarters for the Morgellons contested illness community. For example, the website provides links to political tools, a means of collecting research donations, a newsletter, and access to numerous other Morgellons information archives, such as newspaper articles and television transcripts. Though the Morgellons site does not offer a forum for visitors to partake in real-time communication, they are invited to submit and post online their experiences with Morgellons, as well as to sign up to receive e-mail notifications about upcoming Morgellons community events. By examining the entirety of the Morgellons website, I obtained a substantial portion of the pro-Morgellons discourse and its relationship to multiple social fields.

I also analysed the site Morgellonswatch because it represents the most systematic and thorough lay-initiated source aimed at debunking the Morgellons movement. Morgellonswatch claims to provide online 'resources for Morgellons investigators. Sceptical analysis and discussion'. Along with a blog page where people debate the legitimacy of Morgellons, Morgellons watch vigilantly critiques the postings on the Morgellons site. For example, a section of its homepage reads: 'The Evidence Indicates: 1. The fibers are environmental and unrelated to any illness 2. Morgellons is not a distinct disease 3. People who think they have 'Morgellons' probably have a mixed variety of physical and/or mental illnesses'. Morgellons watch is maintained by an anonymous figure; however, the site is currently inactive — a posting dating 3 December 2008 reads: 'This site is now inactive until there are some major new developments, such as the CDC reporting back. All comments are closed'.

To assess Morgellons' relationship with the popular media, I used *Lexis Nexis Academic* to retrieve the 387 television transcripts that address Morgellons; this article's analysis works in detail with the 19 which were aired on major American networks such as ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, etc. Additionally, I draw on those transcripts from local television stations which are archived on the Morgellons website. I also used *Lexis Nexis Academic* to locate Morgellons articles in the print media. In total, my analysis focuses on the 10 Morgellons articles

published in American newspapers categorised as 'major world publications'. I also, once again, utilise the several articles from community newspapers and lay-oriented health and science magazines like *Psychology Today* which are archived on the Morgellons website. Attention to these various archived print and visual media sources is critical because the Morgellons website makes them readily available to a nationwide audience.

For the stance of the medical profession, I searched PubMed for both DP and Morgellons articles and letters published in peer-reviewed journals. Of the over 100 articles on DP, I selected the several domestic and international research reviews of DP, which provide the basic contours of DP's relationship with clinical practice. Additionally, I analyse in detail the 10 Morgellons articles and letters published in the medical literature to illustrate how the diagnostic processes of both DP and Morgellons itself have changed over the course of the Morgellons trajectory.

Case Report

A 50-year-old married female presented with complaints of fibers coming out of her skin. Six months ago her wardrobe collapsed when she was standing next to it. She did not get any external injury but she believes that the glass particles had gotten embedded into her skin. Few days after this incident she started complaining of fibers coming out of her skin. She also complained of occasional burning, itching, disturbed sleep, and tiredness. She visited several doctors and was treated for presumed scabies and dry skin but with no relief of her symptoms. A few months later after reading about her symptoms on the Internet she diagnosed herself to be suffering from Morgellons disease. There was no significant medical history or history of any psychiatric illness in self or family. On enquiry it was found that she had a fixed belief that the fibers were embedded in her skin and were extruding from it. She even brought the alleged fibers with her in a folded piece of paper.

The patient was conscious and cooperative but appeared anxious. On thorough clinical examination there were no skin lesions found anywhere on her body including excoriations. On examining the material brought by her under the microscope

they found dark-colored fine and coarse fibers some of which showed localized nodes and thread-like extensions. There was no hair, nits, or any other structure of dermatological significance. They deduced that the fibers were derived from a broom stick and hence made a provisional diagnosis of Morgellons disease.

Psychiatric evaluation revealed that she had moderate depression with muttering to self, sadness of mood, easy irritability, and easy fatigability in view of the nosymptomatic hypochondriasis of the patient. Her investigations reported an increase in serum alkaline phosphatase, deranged random blood sugar, and moderately raised C-reactive protein. The complete blood count, serum creatinine, BUN, and rest of the liver function tests were within normal limits. She was started on tablet risperidone 2 mg at night and tablet olanzapine 0.5 mg HS along with a topical emollient as a placebo and was asked to follow up in a week. On her next visit, the patient did not show much improvement and had again gotten the fibers that she believed extruded from her skin in the last week they increased the dose of risperidone to 2 mg BD and continued the rest of her medications including the topical emollient. On her next follow up 10 days later, the patient seemed to be doing much better and said there was about 75% improvement in her symptoms

Common Signs and Symptoms

Patients often complain of burning, stinging, and crawling sensation underneath their skin along with fibers or threads

coming off their skin, which may or may not be associated with itching and pain. They also have difficulty in falling asleep and give a history of chronic fatigue. The disease is more commonly found in educated women in their fourth or fifth decade and more often than not they have either read about it on the Internet or heard about similar stories from friends and relatives and they diagnose themselves as having it. It had been said to be a disease 'spread via media.'

Drug of Choice

Treatment: Drugs of choice are second-generation or "atypical" antipsychotics such as risperidone, amisulpride, or olanzapine. Earlier pimozide was the treatment of choice but is no longer used owing to serious adverse effects such as QT interval prolongation, arrhythmias, and torsades de pointes. For better management of such patients the dermatologists must be in close collaboration with the psychiatrists.

I present this case of Morgellons disease due to its rarity and to highlight the various controversies associated with this poorly defined illness. I am unable to find any prior reports of this disease in India.