ESF Exploratory Workshop on

Understanding the genetic, physiological and psychological mechanisms underlying disabling medically unexplained symptoms and somatisation

Munich (Germany), 10-12 September 2009

SCIENTIFIC REPORT
1. Executive Summary

The workshop defined the most promising avenues of research concerning the aetiology and pathophysiology of “medically unexplained symptoms”, somatisation and functional somatic syndromes (e.g. chronic fatigue and irritable bowel syndromes and chronic widespread pain). The workshop focussed first on commonalities and differences between symptoms and syndromes. We examined similarities and difference across functional somatic syndromes and somatisation in terms of genetics, stress physiology/immunology, the effect of childhood adversities, central processing and response to treatment. The workshop then examined the possibilities of future collaborative research – what the aims of such a collaboration would be and how it could be realised.

The workshop brought together a multidisciplinary panel of researchers from several European countries to identify new avenues of research under 4 headings:

(a) Defining the phenotype for imaging, genetic and immune studies,
(b) Discussing ways of accumulating large population based studies and of identifying the new onset “cases” for intensive study,
(c) Examining possible new avenues of investigation using genetic, physiologically and, possibly, studies of childhood adversities.
(d) Discussing the possibilities/necessities for health service and other research that incorporates the socio-cultural differences concerning this field in Europe (including pathways to care and to chronic disorder).

This aim was achieved. 21 researchers from 7 EU countries contributed to a programme which was based on brief presentations of existing knowledge and ideas for further research. Each presentation was followed by a discussion, twice the length of the presentation, so that all participants contributed to all parts of the workshop.

The workshop results illustrate the currently still rather sporadic progress that is being made towards a fuller understanding of the aetiology of the functional somatic syndromes. It can be seen that research across several syndromes is more likely to provide useful information than research solely within one syndrome and that research into the classification and aetiology of numerous somatic symptoms could be usefully linked to studies of these syndromes. The field requires also, however, a constant re-evaluation of existing ideas and theoretical concepts as these are challenged by, for example, a re-examination of mediators in psychological treatment studies of chronic fatigue. The newer techniques, such as novel
measures of cardiac vagal tone or fMRI, need to be used in a creative way in carefully
selected groups of patients where all important confounders are controlled if we are to learn
which psychosocial variables are truly associated with which psychological or somatic ones.
The rationale of the group formed in Munich is to develop such a co-ordinated series of
studies. The chances of successful funding for such studies should improve now that the
methods of research are becoming more sound and the importance of the functional somatic
syndromes and somatisation as major causes of disability and high healthcare costs are being
recognised.

2. Scientific Report
Functional somatic syndromes (e.g. chronic fatigue, irritable bowel syndrome and chronic
widespread pain) have been studied primarily as individual syndromes to establish their
aetiology. Over the last decade there has been a growing recognition that the syndromes have
much in common including a female sex predominance, a close association with anxiety and
depression and with stressful life events. Yet little research has considered the risk factors for
several syndromes in the same study possibly because of the difficulty in getting research
funding for several disorder simultaneously.

Recent findings from individual functional somatic syndromes that might be generalisable to
other syndromes were illustrated by findings in functional gastrointestinal disorders and
chronic fatigue.

Irritable bowel syndrome
Francis Creed (UK) highlighted the importance of “somatisation” (numerous bodily
symptoms) as an important factor which is associated with marked disability and high
healthcare costs. Lukas Van Oudenhove (Belgium) and Adam Farmer (UK) focussed on
mechanisms underlying visceral pain hypersensitivity. It was demonstrated that the nature of
variations in cardiac vagal tone in response to painful stimuli, appears to be associated with
level of neuroticism. Using meta-analysis, Judith Rosmalen (Netherlands) was able to show
that lower baseline cardiac vagal activity has been established in patients with various
functional somatic syndromes with no apparent differences between chronic fatigue, irritable
bowel syndrome and chronic widespread pain. By contrast a similar approach to HPA axis
activity found evidence of lower cortisol levels in chronic fatigue syndrome and, possibly, in
chronic widespread pain, but not in irritable bowel syndrome.
Chronic Fatigue
Research in chronic fatigue syndrome using cluster analytic techniques has established several subgroups, some of which have been also arisen from genetic studies. Peter White (UK) emphasised the need for repetition of this work in large, population-based studies which should be across functional syndromes not within a single syndrome. Review and re-analysis of data from randomised controlled trials of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) for chronic fatigue syndrome led Hans Knoop (Netherlands) to demonstrate that the positive effect of treatment is not mediated by increased physical activity, as previously thought. The beneficial effect of CBT on fatigue is related primarily to changes in illness related cognitions, including a discrepancy between perception and observed level of functioning, a difference which has been correlated with fMRI findings.

Diagnostic and classificatory issues
Existing diagnostic classificatory systems were found to be inadequate in this area of psychiatry so Per Klausen Fink (Denmark) and Bernd Löwe (Germany) examined new diagnoses that might be used in future work. The proposed DSM-V diagnosis of “complex somatic symptom disorder” may have the highest validity and clinical utility because it includes psychological and behavioural criteria and incorporates a dimensional approach to measure both somatic and psychological symptom severity. An alternative approach is based on somatic symptoms, which includes under the new diagnosis of “Body distress disorder” patients with all relevant syndromes. A measure of severity is the number of bothersome somatic symptoms, independent of diagnosis. This was found in a large, prospective population-based study reported by Ladwig and colleagues, to be predictive of poor outcomes, even after adjustment for a wide range of confounders including chronic physical diseases.

Genetic studies
Genetic studies are really in their infancy in this area because of an ill-defined phenotype but investigations to date suggest that there may be a genetic basis to some aspects of functional somatic syndromes. Specific symptom patterns and the presence of multiple somatic symptoms both appear to have more pronounced unique environmental effects than genetic ones (Pedersen and Kato). John McBeth (UK) reported preliminary evidence of associations between number of somatic symptoms and SNPs in the serotonin and HPA axis pathway genes.
Integration of findings

One way forward in this area of research is to seek specificity of association between psychosocial variables and psychological or biological responses. Preliminary findings suggest that childhood abuse is associated with a specific cerebral response to visual stimuli indicating pain, even after controlling for depression, anxiety and numerous somatic symptoms (Tölle and Gündel, Germany) but such closely controlled studies are rare. It was suggested (Rief, Germany) that this greater specificity would mean building on current knowledge, for example, of the genetics of pain sensitivity or immune response rather than examining the genetic associations of specific functional somatic syndromes, and seeking similarities and differences between somatisation and depression in view of the recognised difference in HPA axis reactivity (enhanced in depression but blunted or otherwise in functional somatic syndromes). In this way we should accept that some aetiological factors may be relevant to all functional somatic syndromes and some may be relevant only to one but, in addition, some may only apply in subgroups of patients within syndromes.

3. Assessment of the results, contribution to the future direction of the field, outcome

The group recognised that a number of design features for future studies include the following:

a) Two kinds of study design are required to measure predictors of change:
   i. longitudinal population-based studies
   ii. intervention studies

b) In both designs, it is important to measure a variety of functional symptoms and syndromes as outcomes, not just focus on a single syndrome or symptom as in so much previous research

c) Data analyses should, preferably, be directed towards trajectories of change (towards disease or remission), acknowledging important mediators (including psychopathology and medication use) and moderators (including DNA) and recognizing patient subgroups within the functional somatic syndromes

d) large samples are necessary to encompass all of these features and to perform satisfactory genetic studies.
e) functional imaging studies and studies of physiological parameters, e.g. response of the autonomic nervous system would benefit from using a common protocol at different centres and to included a wide variety of participants from different syndromes

To this end, several sub-groups were formed:

1. Uniform measures and diagnostic constructs sub-group makes suggestion for core set of instruments (Per Fink, Bernd Löwe, Winfried Rief)
2. Neuroimaging subgroup co-ordinates designs across different functional somatic symptoms (Lukas van Oudenhove, Adam Farmer, Harald Gündel, Thomas Tölle, Ralph Mager)
3. Population study sub-group collects information on existing and planned cohorts (Judith Rosmalen, Karl-Heinz Ladwig, Kenji Kato, Kari Ann Leiknes)

As basis for further actions, the group discussed and agreed as a common aim of the group:

- to understand the common and specific aspects of diagnosis, aetiology and maintenance of Functional Somatic Syndromes (FSS)
- to develop and unify a field of research, using an integration of biological, psychological and sociocultural approaches
- this will enable us to improve prevention, detection and treatment of these syndromes

It was agreed that there would be a further meeting on 22nd/23rd March 2010 in Munich. There, further steps for submitting proposals within the ESF and/or EU FP programmes will be considered.

Papers arising from presentations and discussions at the workshop will be published in a Special Issue (Eds. F Creed and P Henningsen) of the Journal of Psychosomatic Research approx. in May 2010.
4. FINAL PROGRAMME

Thursday 10 September 2009

Morning  Arrival  Lunch
12.00 – 13.00  Welcome address  Francis Creed (Manchester Royal Infirmary, UK) and Peter Henningsen (Klinikumrechts der Isar, Munich, DE) and
13.00 – 13.15  Presentation of the European Science Foundation (ESF)  Janos Réthelyi (ESF Standing Committee for the European Medical Research Councils - EMRC)
13.15 – 13.45  Aims of the conference and the “one or many” debate  Peter Henningsen (Klinikumrechts der Isar, Munich, DE) and Francis Creed (Manchester Royal Infirmary, UK)  
14.00 – 14.30  Discussion  Session A: Aetiological research in single functional somatic syndromes  
14.30 – 14.45  Example 1: Studies in irritable bowel syndrome  Francis Creed (Manchester Royal Infirmary, UK)
14.45 – 15.15  Discussion  
15.15 – 15.45  Coffee / Tea Break  
15.45 – 16.00  Rethinking studies concerning the neuroimaging and pathophysiology of functional GI disorders and pain perception  Lukas Van Oudenhove (University Hospital Gasthuisberg, Leuven, BE)  Adam Farmer (Neurogastroenterology, St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, London)
16.00 – 16.30  Discussion  
16.30 – 16.45  Example 2: Findings in Chronic fatigue syndrome  Peter White (London School of Medicine and Dentistry, UK)
16.45 – 17.15  Discussion  
19.30  Dinner  

Friday 11 September 2009

09.00-09.15  What have we learned from cohort and treatment studies in CFS?  Hans Knoop (Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Center, NL)
09.15-09.45  Discussion  
09.45-10.00  Genetic findings in population based studies of chronic widespread pain  John McBeth (Arc Epidemiology Unit, University of Manchester, UK)
10.00-10.30  Discussion  
10.30-11.00  Coffee / Tea Break
Session B: Identifying common ground 1: diagnosis, classification and common factors

11.00-11.15  Improving diagnosis and classification: body distress syndrome and alternatives*  
Per Klausen Fink (The Research Clinic for Functional Disorders and Psychosomatics, Aarhus University Hospital, DK)

11.15-11.45  Discussion

11.45-12.00  Psychological processes common to the somatisation and related disorders*  
Bernd Löwe (Universitätsklinikum Hamburg-Eppendorf, DE)

12.00-12.30  Discussion

12.30-13.45  Lunch

Session C: Identifying common ground 2: Possible new avenues of investigation using population based, genetic and physiological studies

13.45-14.00  Population based studies of somatic symptoms  
Karl-Heinz Ladwig (Helmholtz-Zentrum, Oberschleissheim, DE) and Francis Creed (Manchester Royal Infirmary, UK)

14.00-14.30  Discussion

14.30-14.45  Perspectives of functional neuroimaging studies on pain in functional somatic and other syndromes  
Thomas Tölle (Klinikumrechts der Isar, Munich, DE) and Harald Gündel (Medizinische Hochschule Hannover, DE)

14.45-15.15  Discussion

15.15-15.45  Coffee / tea break

15.45-16.00  Genetic epidemiological studies of functional gastro-intestinal disorders and chronic fatigue  
Nancy Pedersen (Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, SE) and Kenji Kato (International University of Health and Welfare, Kanagawa, JP)

16.00-16.30  Discussion

16.30-16.45  Stress physiology in relation to functional somatic syndromes in longitudinal studies  
J.G.M. Rosmalen (University Medical Center Groningen, NL)

16.45-17.15  Discussion

17.15-17.30  Genetic association and immunological studies in somatisation and somatic symptoms  
Winfried Rief (Klinische Psychology and Psychotherapie, Universität Marburg, DE)

17.30-18.00  Discussion

19.30  Dinner
Saturday 12 September 2009

**Session D: Future research**

09.30-11.00  **General discussion of future research plans and how they will be implemented** – chaired by [Francis Creed](#) (Manchester Royal Infirmary, UK) and [Peter Henningsen](#) (Klinikumrechts der Isar, Munich, DE)

i.e.:

- Defining a list of research questions
- Forming a central co-ordinating group
- Practical steps

11.00-11.30  **Coffee / Tea Break**

11.30-13.00  **General discussion of future research plans and how they will be implemented – ctd.**

13.00  **Lunch**

*afternoon*  **departure**
5. Final List of Participants

Convenor:

1. Francis CREED
   Manchester Royal Infirmary
   Manchester
   United Kingdom
   francis.creed@manchester.ac.uk

Co-Convenor:

2. Peter HENNINGSEN
   Klinikum rechts der Isar der Technischen Universität München
   München
   Germany
   P.henningsen@tum.de

ESF Representative:

3. Janos Réthelyi
   Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy
   Semmelweis University
   Budapest
   Hungary
   retjan@net.sote.hu

Participants:

4. Hans KNOOP
   Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre
   Nijmegen
   The Netherlands
   j.knoop@nkcv.umcn.nl

5. Per Klausen FINK
   The Research Clinic for Functional Disorders and Psychosomatics
   Aarhus University Hospital
   Aarhus
   Denmark
   malene.skoeth@aarhus.rm.dk

6. John MCBETH
   Arc Epidemiology Unit
   University of Manchester
   Manchester
   United Kingdom
   helen.flint@manchester.ac.uk

7. Christina VAN DER FELTZ-CORNELIS
   Trimbos Institute/ Netherlands institute of Mental Health and Addiction
   Utrecht
   The Netherlands
   dheijnert@trimbos.nl

8. J.G.M. ROSMALEN
   Interdisciplinary Center for Psychiatric Epidemiology
   University Medical Center Groningen
   Groningen
   The Netherlands
   j.g.m.rosmalen@med.umcg.nl

9. Ralph MAGER
   Universitäre Psychiatrische Kliniken Basel (UPK)
   Basel
   Switzerland
   ram@coat-basel.com

10. Lukas VAN OUDENHOVE
    Secretary of Liaison Psychiatry
    University Hospital Gasthuisberg
    Leuven
    Belgium
    Lukas.VanOudenhove@med.kuleuven.be

11. Bernd LÖWE
    Institut und Poliklinik für Psychosomatische Medizin und Psychotherapie
    Universitätsklinikum Hamburg-Eppendorf
    Hamburg
    Germany
    b.loewe@uke.uni-hamburg.de

12. Kari Ann LEIKNES
    Institute of Basic Medical Sciences, Department of Behavioural Sciences in Medicine
    Faculty of Medicine
    University of Oslo
    Oslo
    Norway
    kari.ann.leiknes@kunnskapssenteret.no

13. Wendy THOMSON
    arc Epidemiology Unit
    School of Translational Medicine
    Epidemiology Research Group
    Stopford Building
    University of Manchester
    Manchester
    United Kingdom
    Wendy.thomson@manchester.ac.uk

14. Kenji KATO
    School of Nursing and Rehabilitation
    International University of Health and Welfare
    Kanagawa 250-8588
    Japan
    kenji-kato@umin.ac.jp
15. Peter D WHITE
   Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, 
   Queen Mary University of London 
   St Bartholomew's Hospital 
   London 
   United Kingdom 
   p.d.white@qmul.ac.uk

16. Nancy PEDERSEN
   Karolinska Institutet 
   Department of Medical Epidemiology and 
   Biostatistics 
   Stockholm 
   Sweden 
   Marie.Krushammar@ki.se

17. Judith PRINS
   Radboud University Nijmegen Medical 
   Centre 
   Nijmegen 
   The Netherlands 
   J.Prins@mps.umcn.nl

18. Winfried RIEF
   Klinische Psychologie und 
   Psychotherapie 
   Universität Marburg 
   Marburg 
   Germany 
   rief@staff.uni-marburg.de

19. Harald GÜNDEL
   Klinische Psychiatrie und Psychotherapie 
   Medizinische Hochschule Hannover 
   Hannover 
   Germany 
   Psychosomatik@mh-hannover.de

20. Thomas TÖLLE
   Klinikum rechts der Isar der Technischen 
   Universität München 
   Neurologische Klinik 
   München 
   Germany 
   toelle@lrz.tu-muenchen.de

   Helmholtz-Zentrum 
   Oberschleissheim 
   Germany 
   ladwig@helmholtz-muenchen.de
6. Statistical Information on Participants

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