

Professor Sir Simon Wessely – Right or Wrong? UPDATE

Margaret Williams 21st April 2014

In October 2013 evidence was collated that disputed – indeed disproved – Professor Sir Simon Wessely’s long-held belief that disorders including ME/CFS, fibromyalgia, Gulf War Syndrome and interstitial cystitis are but different parts of the same “elephant”, the “elephant” being a functional somatic disorder: *“Many of these syndromes are dignified by their own case definition and body of research....We question this orthodoxy and ask whether these syndromes represent specific diagnostic entities, or are they rather more like the elephant to the blind man – simply different parts of a larger animal?”* (Lancet 1999:354:936-939). The article also provided evidence that Wessely was equally wrong about the Camelford drinking water catastrophe (Professor Sir Simon Wessely -- Right or Wrong? <http://www.meactionuk.org.uk/Right-or-Wrong.htm>).

Whilst some internet commentators question the benefit of re-visiting the past and wish only to move onwards, others hold the view that dismissal of the damage done to sick people by the wrongful ascription of a mental health label to a physical disorder hinders proper understanding and prevents similar damage from being repeated in the future, since nothing constructive has been learned from the unnecessary iatrogenic suffering and no-one has been held accountable for it.

With this in mind and with the emergence of further autopsy evidence, it is timely to reconsider the enormity of the wrong perpetrated by Wessely upon the people of Camelford (a small town in Cornwall), since the whole issue has once again surfaced and deserves global attention.

It will be recalled that in July 1988 residents of Camelford were poisoned when 20 tonnes of aluminium sulphate were accidentally pumped into their drinking water supply; seven people died; 25,000 suffered serious health effects and 40,000 animals were affected (Dr Douglas Cross: *The Ecologist*:1990:20:6:228-233).

In 1995, Wessely and his co-psychiatrist Anthony David wrote an editorial in *The Journal of Psychosomatic Research* entitled *“The Legend of Camelford: Medical Consequences of a Water Pollution Accident”* in which they said: *“Further health monitoring of the population at risk was considered...unnecessary...since the results would ‘be heavily influenced by people’s fears of long term effects’ ”* and they noted that symptoms being reported *“were put down to anxiety”*. David and Wessely commented that: *“Psychological ‘damage’ can lead to successful compensation claims (and)*

it was clear that at Camelford a physical attribution was required by sufferers". They concluded: "We suggest that the most likely explanation of the Camelford findings is that the perception of normal and benign somatic symptoms (physical and mental) by both subjects and health professionals was heightened and subsequently attributed to an external, physical cause such as poisoning....It is probable that among those afflicted are a few individuals with pre-existing somatisation or abridged somatisation disorders...which were then diverted to fall in line with the prevailing complaints of the affected population....Future investigations of environmental incidents should recall that social and cultural factors are as important as medical ones".

That same year the BMJ published a "re-assessment" of Wessely's conclusions (Still waters. 5th August 1995:311:395); it found that *"mass hysteria was largely responsible for the furor"*.

Recently the Daily Mail published an in-depth article by Simon Trump: *"Village of the damned: Mysterious suicides. Agonising illness. And now, 25 years after UK's worst case of mass poisoning, the first evidence that dirty water has killed people"*: 19th April 2014:
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2608449/Village-damned-Mysterious-suicides-Agonising-illness-And-25-years-UKs-worst-case-mass-poisoning-evidence-dirty-water-KILLED-people.html>).

Trump sets out the evidence that dead villagers have been found to have had high levels of aluminium in their brain, suffering early onset dementia and a relatively early death.

As Trump says: *"It was the worst case of mass poisoning in British history. The effects were noticed within 90 minutes and included diarrhoea and vomiting, severe joint aches, and blistering. Hands and lips stuck together. Hair turned green, fingernails blue"*.

Trump exposes yet more aluminium-linked deaths than were previously known about and sets out factual evidence obtained at autopsy by Christopher Exley, Professor in Bioinorganic Chemistry at Keele University, who found abnormally high levels of aluminium per gram of dry tissue in samples from Camelford residents.

Professor Exley noted that a finding of more than one microgram of aluminium per gram of dry tissue was *"a little unusual"*, and that samples from deceased Camelford residents were significantly high, with one such sample being more than 94 micrograms per gram of dry tissue.

At the time, scientists found levels of aluminium in the drinking water of Camelford to be between 500 and 3,000 times the maximum judged acceptable under EU law.

In his article, Trump considers numerous cases who were affected, including the case of one of the deceased who had undergone tests, scans and biopsies while still alive which showed high levels of aluminium in his blood and bones and which caused the protein plaque deposits that led to his early death from dementia. The man developed epilepsy and long before the onset of dementia, he suffered constant memory loss, kidney problems, skin complaints, gum disease, ear infections and brittle bones. The blood flow in his brain was also restricted.

As Trump makes clear, in 1988 the privatisation of the water industry was looming and Camelford was a major embarrassment. In 2001 the then Environment Minister, Michael Meacher, said that the issue had *"become a tug of war between the truth and an attempt to silence the truth"*.

Wessely's part in the dismissal of such devastating suffering as mere "perception" and his confident assertions that there was no evidence of long-term adverse effects on health as a consequence of the drinking water contamination should not be under-estimated when considering the Camelford catastrophe.

Should he not at last admit that he was wrong and publicly apologise?