

MCS Story **Roberta Krehbiel**

Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) is not recognized as an illness or disability by many medical professionals or insurance companies.

For many years my immune system was being unknowingly compromised by the daily bombardment of chemicals. I experienced health problems in the gastrointestinal, circulatory, respiratory, muscular-skeletal, and neurological systems with many hospitalizations, tests, and diagnoses which were not the answer to my problem.

By 1980 my muscular and neurological systems were so compromised that a reputable Midwest clinic felt I had MS. My local medical doctor recommended vitamins that I continued to take while attending Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, France in 1984.

I seemed to be improving. However, at the end of the first teacher's work day I jokingly remarked to my co-teacher, "I think this building is making me sick!" Later I found out I wasn't joking. They had laid some new carpet, painted and refinished the floor and changed the heating in my room. I continued to teach with difficulty--lost weight, no energy, lack of concentration, extreme tiredness, funny eyes. I pleaded, "God help me. I'll do anything to get better. You've always been with me but I need some answers." The answers He gave were not what I was expecting!

I reacted violently after the school fogged for cockroaches and head lice. My local doctor gave me a medical leave "until the 'allergies' improved." Little did I know that was the end of my teaching career.

In the summer of 1985 I was referred to a clinical ecologist in Chicago. Our MMA insurance wasn't approving the hospitalization in a totally controlled environmental unit so we borrowed most of the \$15,000 necessary to be admitted. During that twenty-one day stay, I was amazed as to what caused many adverse reactions.

Back home, our house was stripped of non-essentials and made more tolerable with air filters. I used vinegar and baking soda for cleaning and washing clothes--no toothpaste, soap or deodorant. Metal sensitivity left me with no amalgam fillings, no jewelry, zippers or snaps. I cooked in glass pans on a glass topped stove, ate only food from glass jars on a glass plate with wooden eating utensils. I sat on sheepskin to avoid contact with wood finishes and synthetic fabrics. At church I sat in the choir with wonderful people who were willing to quit using perfumes, aftershaves, and deodorants, and wore cotton clothing. Oh, how I appreciated their willingness to help as well as my loving and supportive husband who never wavered throughout almost fifty years of marriage.

Insurance companies demanded I be retested every year even though tests made me extremely ill. It was quite frustrating to work with them in their traditional ways.

While attending a Mennonite District Conference at Goshen College we were compelled to flee immediately after the soccer field was sprayed for grubs while we were walking across campus.

I have not had any real need for antibiotics since 1984. When I had to have a tooth surgically removed, the doctor used one tenth of the normal dose of local anesthetic and my jaw was still numb for two days!



I served on the Mennonite Environmental Task Force which was created by the delegates at the Normal, Illinois joint conference of the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church. Today this group has been replaced by the [Mennonite Creation Care Network](#) in cooperation with the Merry Lee Learning Center.

I am aware that more people are becoming sensitive to things in the environment and are puzzled as to how to cope. I presented a workshop on chemical sensitivity at the Central District Conference meetings in the 1990's where I found a very receptive audience who were sensitive to odorous things as well as chemicals such as MSG in foods. They expressed an interest in supporting one another, but how? Communication was difficult.

Now, with Anabaptist Disabilities Network, we may have found a "home." We suffer silently, many times at home with little contact with others. We need more than that! We need dedicated people who will help us present our needs to churches, conferences, and especially to insurance companies, since most of our treatments are not presently covered.

I envision a network where we can communicate with each other, offer suggestions, and give support. That is my dream.

Caregiver Response: Rudy Krehbiel (age 76) husband of Roberta

I try to stay away from chemicals of all kinds. If I suspect I'm carrying something bad I try to remember to change clothes before entering the house and then showering. In public, we sometimes need to move if a person comes in with strong odors. We have noticed that "fresh" perfume is much worse than that which has been applied 2-3 hours earlier. Our friends and relatives are reasonably good at remembering about "smells", etc. after 20+ years.

My life has changed. What is normal for most people is not normal for us. That is just a fact that we must accept. It takes lots support and patience (with some frustration) to find the things that are triggers.