

Book Review

The Allergy Problem. Why People Suffer and What Should Be Done Vicky Rippere, Ph.D., M.Phil. Thorsons Publ. Ltd. Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, England, 1983.

Allergic reactions to substances in our environment (air, water, soil and food) are very common, have become increasingly common and probably will continue to afflict more and more people. To deal with this problem a number of good books have appeared, usually published in the U.S.A. Most of them describe the reactions, ways of dealing with them, and provide nutritional and dietary, even culinary, advice. These publications are filling the void in medical education present in doctors, but unfortunately these books are mostly read by the non-physician public. Most medical schools are convinced there is no problem and see no need to use up valuable time that, in their opinion, is best used for teaching surgery, medicine, pharmacology and so on.

Dr. Vicky Rippere's book *The Allergy Problem* is one of the few psychosocial studies which describe the social and psy-

chological factors and problems generated in people by their allergies.

She had 85 people (20 male, 65 female) fill in a questionnaire. As this was not selected at random to be a sample of all sufferers from allergies her conclusions apply only to this group of 85. It is unlikely they would differ greatly from other groups of allergy sufferers.

From this group 90 percent came from allergic families. For most, the symptoms began early in life and remained with them. Forty percent suffer from the same symptoms. Sixty percent noted some change in symptoms. In fact in my opinion variability of symptoms is quite general for allergic people. Foods which were present in over 20 percent of the subjects in descending order of frequency were wheat, milk products, additives, coffee, alcohol, citrus fruits, corn, egg, sugar, oats and tea.

Almost every symptom known may be reproduced by allergic reactions. Headache occurred in nearly half of this group. Mental illness and confusion appeared in one-quarter. Anxiety and hyperactivity appeared in 11 percent. Depression was common in 23 subjects. The major offenders were wheat

and milk products, both accounting for half the cases.

Seventy-nine sought medical help, often seeing many doctors, and often allergies were the last diagnosis given. When patients were not helped they turned to alternative practitioners and to clinical ecologists. The main complaint about clinical ecology was the difficulty in finding clinical ecologists. Comparing the results of treatment of these three groups, the following was reported.

Treatment	Results		Side Effects
	No Benefit	Success-ful	
Conventional	30%	24%	12%
Alternative Clinical	44%	25%	6%
Ecology	—	54%	5%
Self Help	2%	78%	2%

I have omitted percentages reporting transient and moderate benefit. Perhaps a good measure of success is the ratio of the percentage treated successfully compared to those suffering side effects. For conventional, alternative and clinical ecologists the ratios are 2, 4 and 11.

Not surprisingly, since they had difficulty finding physicians who were helpful, patients were thrown on their own resources. They must have gotten their information from books such as this one and from one or more of ten groups developed to help patients. They provided "information, understanding, support and advice that the statutory services seem

either unable or unwilling to provide." Self help results were best of all with a therapeutic ratio of 39.

Obviously allergies limit what patients can do depending upon the type and severity of the response. The effect can range from complete withdrawal to slight interference in daily activities.

Dr. Rippere also has a chapter on "Social Reactions to Allergic People" and one on "Special Worries of Allergic People."

The last chapter discusses the sufferers view. They suggest: (1) more publicity in the media, (2) greater public understanding and sympathy, and (3) education of doctors and other professionals. Twenty-nine suggested the first and eighteen the last. It appears as if these sufferers have concluded more information is more apt to help others than medical education. Since it often takes forty years for the medical profession to learn new treatments, perhaps they have an accurate perception of what will work best.

Dr. Rippere states, "In the past few years, popular understanding of environmental intolerance has outstripped that of the majority of doctors — clinical ecologists and Orthomolecular physicians and psychiatrists being the sole exception to this dismal generalization."

I would expect similar surveys in North America would yield similar conclusions. Are there any sociologists or psychologists willing to repeat this study?

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