

## **Somatoforms disorders in general practice. A medical or a public health issue?**

Dr. Albert M. van Hemert, Dr. Margot W.M. de Waal, Dr. Ingrid A. Arnold

Parnassia centre for mental health care and drug addiction  
Department of emergency psychiatry, AC-2  
Avocadostraat 2  
2552 HS The Hague  
The Netherlands

**AIMS:** to assess the viability of approaching the management of medically unexplained symptoms in primary care by individual or group therapy

**METHODS:** in the period from 1999 to 2004 we conducted a comprehensive study of the epidemiology and treatment of somatoform disorders in general practice. A total number of 5.766 patients from general practice and from the general population were included in a various parts of the of study. The main sample of 1.778 consecutive consulting patients were included in a two-stage prevalence study using screening questionnaires and the WHO-SCAN 2.1 diagnostic interview. The patient were followed for a period of six months. Patients with persisting symptoms were included in a pilot study with group therapy and in a randomized study of 5 sessions of a cognitive-behavioural approach by the general practitioner.

**RESULTS:** of the consulting population 30% presented with medically unexplained symptoms. With a total prevalence of 16.1% somatoform disorders were the most prevalent psychiatric disorders in primary care. The prevalence of undifferentiated somatoform disorders (UDS) was 13.0% as compared to 5.5% for anxiety disorders and 4.1% for depressive disorders. Co-morbidity was substantial. In a follow-up study the presence of UDS was a predictor of medical utilisation independent of co-morbid depression. It was estimated that in addition to current treatments there was a need of cognitive therapy for unexplained symptoms in approximately 5% of the consulting patients. However, in this study group therapy and a limited treatment by the general practitioner did not prove successful.

**CONCLUSION:** medical unexplained physical symptoms and somatoform disorders are very common in general practice. To provide professional cognitive behavioural therapy to all patients with these disorders is expensive. It may be more efficient to choose a public health approach. Shifting the western cultural bias of consulting doctors for all sorts of ailments only a little bit could have a noticeable impact on health care expenditure.