

Top Ten Tips for Medically Unexplained Symptoms

Medically unexplained symptoms (MUS) is the term given to repeated help-seeking for physical symptoms for which no clear or consistent organic pathology can be demonstrated. Eg: Pain in various locations, functional disturbance of organ systems, fatigue.

1. The annual healthcare costs of MUS are estimated at about £3 billion in the UK. They can lead to significant distress for patients and high stress levels for clinicians.
2. The role of the GP is significant in the management of patients with MUS, particularly continuity with one GP where possible.
3. MUS account for up to 20% of GP consultations. 25% persist in primary care for over 12 months.
4. Think of associated depression and/ or anxiety. Talking therapies and antidepressants have been shown to improve outcomes.
5. Rule out medical causes but do not investigate or refer endlessly.
6. Encourage and educate the patient to include responsibility and self-management. Holistic care is essential.
7. Focus on managing the symptoms, not finding a cure.
8. Consider regular planned reviews, using double appointments if needed.
9. Ensure good communication with other agencies and healthcare professionals.
10. Remain aware of countertransference feelings of anger and frustration. Make sure you have support available to discuss cases if needed.

References to links to for further information:

1. Patient.co.uk – somatic symptom disorder. <http://patient.info/doctor/somatic-symptom-disorder>
2. NHS Commissioning Support for London. Medically Unexplained Symptoms (MUS): Project Implementation Report. March 2011.
3. Chitnis A, Dowrick C, Byng R et al. Guidance for health professionals on medically unexplained symptoms. 2011; London: Royal College of General Practitioners and Royal College of Psychiatrists.
4. Kirmayer LJ, Groleau D, Looper KJ et al. Explaining medically unexplained symptoms. Can J Psychiatry 2004;49:663-672.
5. Creed F, Henningsen P & Fink P (2011) Medically Unexplained Symptoms, Somatisation and Bodily Distress: developing better clinical services. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (as per Simon for slide 25)