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Fragrance-free environments are not frivolous

Service Canada office sign asking people to avoid scented products

The Environmental Health Association of Canada responds to Patrick Lagacé's column “Have you thought about your scent load today?” published on September 7¹. For Rosa Ianoco, fragrance-free environments are essential because they protect people with disabilities.

When columnist Patrick Lagacé responded to the sign asking people to avoid scented products in Service Canada offices, he presented this policy as excessive and absurd. He argued that, to accommodate “only 3%” of the population, “the federal government would rather you smell like sweat than the artificial scent of deodorant.”

He called the measure cultural “hypersensitivity” and suggested that 97% of people give up basic products—in short, “be gross.” He even proposed that hypersensitive people wear N95 masks or that Canadians be forced to “take a shower” before entering a passport office.

These comments trivialize a recognized disability—multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS)—and fuel stigma that jeopardizes the health and safety of those affected.

I know this from experience. I have been living with MCS since 2007, after being repeatedly exposed to chemicals at work. Because I was denied accommodations, my health gradually deteriorated. I could no longer work, shop, or see my family, and I spent two years in isolation.

When I am exposed to perfumes or chemicals, I quickly develop headaches and eye pain, lose my voice, have difficulty speaking, suffer from confusion, balance problems, and stomach pain. I become unable to function and must leave the premises immediately.

MCS is not a personal preference. It is a recognized disability and protected like any other disability under the *Canadian Human Rights Act* (2007), the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (2019), and the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission confirms this on its website. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in its 2025 Concluding Observations, reiterated that people with MCS are entitled to equal protection, accommodation, and accessible environments.

In June 2025, the American Medical Association adopted a policy recognizing MCS as a condition that can limit major life activities and supporting fragrance-free policies and ingredient labeling.

Daily chemical assaults

I try to lead a normal life, but I am constantly faced with exposures and obstacles. I avoid public places such as movie theaters, conferences, and parties. It also affects my spouse—our outings or vacations are often ruined. Even my hospital appointments are difficult, as I have to deal with the staff and the scented soap in the bathrooms. At home, I react to laundry detergents and my neighbors' cigarette smoke. My body is exhausted by these daily chemical assaults.

MCS develops through sensitization: repeated exposure makes the body increasingly reactive. Common products—perfumes, air fresheners, scented creams, cleaning products—can trigger debilitating symptoms in all body systems. More than one million Canadians have been diagnosed with MCS, and that number is growing.

Patrick Lagacé spoke of “only 3%,” but that excludes millions of other people with asthma, severe allergies, dermatitis, migraines, and other conditions that also depend on clean air.

I am grateful for the rare places where unscented products are used, where I can breathe and live without getting sick. I have been a member of the Quebec and Canadian Environmental Health Association for many years, and I speak on behalf of those who suffer even more and are forced to live in isolation. I hope that more and more people and businesses will recognize the harmful effects of everyday chemicals.

Accommodation measures such as fragrance-free policies are not intended to restrict choice: they ensure that everyone can access public spaces safely and with dignity.

“Fragrance-free” does not mean that people will smell bad. Millions of Canadians use fragrance-free personal care products every day—and they don't smell anything.

Mocking these measures is like mocking a wheelchair, a ramp, a cane, or a guide dog. It sends the message that our safety matters less and encourages others to ignore accessibility rules, creating a real danger.

Thanks to the Association pour la santé environnementale du Québec and the Confédération des organismes de personnes handicapées du Québec, some support exists for people with multiple chemical sensitivity, but services remain scarce, especially in Quebec.

Ridiculing multiple chemical sensitivity is tantamount to disregarding not only an accessibility measure, but also the people who depend on it to breathe, work, and live.