

A Qualitative Exploration of Policy, Institutional, and Social Misconceptions Faced by Individuals with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity

This study explores the challenges faced by people living with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) in Canada, focusing on the misconceptions that shape their daily experiences. Conducted by Susan Yousafzai, Elaine Psaradellis, Rohini Peris, and Caroline Barakat, PhD., in collaboration with the Empowering Community and Removal of Barrier (ECRoB) project, managed by the Environmental Health Association of Québec (EHAQ), the paper aims to uncover the routine challenges faced by a community with minimal exposure from the scientific domain. MCS is a condition in which individuals react to very low levels of everyday chemicals found in products like fragrances, cleaning supplies, and building materials. Because there is no universally accepted medical test for MCS, diagnosis often depends on patient self-reports, which leaves the condition vulnerable to misunderstanding. To study this issue, the authors conducted seven focus groups with 38 participants across Canada, most of whom had a formal MCS diagnosis. Through detailed conversations, participants described the barriers they encounter when trying to live safely in society.

The study found that misconceptions about MCS occur on many levels. A significant theme was the tendency to dismiss MCS as psychological rather than physical. Participants shared that they were often told their condition was “all in their head,” which created stigma, self-doubt, and social exclusion. This misunderstanding also limited access to essential services, workplaces, and safe housing. A second theme was the lack of awareness within healthcare. Many health professionals had little or no knowledge of MCS, leading to inconsistent diagnosis and treatment. This forced some people to turn to alternative therapies, often at personal cost. Participants also noted that governments and institutions do not do enough to promote or enforce fragrance-free environments, which leaves them unprotected in public settings.

A third area of concern was policy. Even when scent-free and lowest-emission policies exist, participants said they are often ignored or poorly enforced. Institutions sometimes resist these policies, seeing them as too difficult to implement, and government regulations rarely address MCS directly. This creates confusion and gaps in support. Finally, participants highlighted the role of commercial marketing in reinforcing misconceptions. Companies frequently promote fragranced products as “fresh” or “natural” without disclosing the chemicals involved. Many participants felt that misleading advertising and the lack of clear labelling increase exposure risks. They also noted that fragrance use has become more widespread, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when scented sanitizers and cleaners became common.

The authors conclude that misconceptions about MCS are not just personal misunderstandings but are embedded in policies, institutions, and social practices. Addressing these challenges requires greater awareness among healthcare providers, stronger policies to ensure safe public spaces, more precise commercial regulation, and more consistent accommodations for people living with MCS. While the study highlights stigma and barriers, it also shows that change is possible through education, policy reform, and community support. The findings underline that

MCS is not only a health issue but also a matter of social justice, accessibility, and rightful accommodations.

Citations

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