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Since she did not have hypertension or renal disease, we decided to start with a treatment regimen for the adrenal fatigue and with vitamins and minerals in which she was found to be low on her labs. She also wanted weekly acupuncture therapy for her symptoms. She worked with a dietitian and removed her food sensitivity items from her diet altogether.

After 3 months of the therapy, she reported that she felt mildly better but still occasionally had symptoms of the tingling and still felt fatigued and achy. She did say that she was about 40% less achy and fatigued but also "still didn't feel like myself."

At this point, I suggested that she get a nerve conduction study done and revisit the neurologist about her symptoms. I also highly recommended that the heavy metal testing be done. The patient assented to the evaluation and labs, since she still was not feeling as well as she would have liked. However, during this time, she also relayed to me that she would be moving to another state and would need to know how to follow up with the test results when they came back, since she probably wouldn't have enough time to do the treatment with me.

When the results came back, they were positive for several heavy metals, and her nerve conduction study was consistent with that as well.

At this point, I went over with the patient more in detail her daily environment and food sources and, after extensive discussion, she mentioned that her family members from Asia had been bringing her teas and dried foods from Asia in the last three years. She really enjoyed the foods and teas and, since she had been using them for a while, had not thought to mention them.

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Once we identified the potential risk of these items from Asia, she decided to stop consuming them. She confessed that she didn't know where the items were purchased from but that she would ask her relatives. We had time for one other lab test before she moved, and so we rechecked the heavy metal levels after a week off the food items, and the levels were indeed lowering.

The patient searched through the national holistic boards and associations and was able to find an integrative practitioner in her new home state. She then had her integrative practitioner there perform chelation therapy and she continued to refrain from those food items.

When she returned this year for a visit with friends, she stopped by my clinic and reported that her pain, fatigue, and tingling were gone and that her recent labs were all normal for heavy metals. She reported that she is just starting to feel more like herself and that the healing process had taken quite a bit of time for her to start to feel "normal again."

She has maintained her vitamins and minerals as well as her diet that is free of gluten and dairy while she was working with her other integrative practitioner. She reported that the entire experience helped her to realize how important food and environment are to her health status and that she is helping her friends and family evaluate these factors in their lives as well.

This case is a great example of a few concepts that I believe make all the difference in patient care. So, I'll leave you with these concepts that I think are important for patients and practitioners alike to keep in mind when assessing disease and symptoms.

One is that food and environment are indeed very important to our health, so delving in deeply with patients about these aspects of their lives is crucial to ascertaining what needs to be treated.

Second is that despite how common the symptoms seem, there is no such thing as cookie-cutter medicine and that each patient needs to be evaluated as though each case is in fact different, even if the symptoms seem common.

Last is that even when symptoms improve, if they persist, it pays to dig deeper to try to get rid of as much of the problem as possible; had we stopped looking at 40% improvement, we would never have dug up this patient's problem with heavy metal toxicity.

Julie T. Chen, MD, is board-certified in internal medicine and is also fellowship-trained and board-certified in integrative medicine. She has her own medical practice in San Jose, California; is the medical director of corporation wellness at several Silicon Valley-based corporations; is on several medical expert panels of websites as well as nonprofit organizations; is a recurring monthly columnist for several national magazines; and has been featured in radio, newspaper, and magazine interviews. She incorporates healing modalities into her practice, including but not limited to medical acupuncture, Chinese scalp acupuncture, clinical hypnotherapy, strain-counterstrain osteopathic manipulations, and biofeedback.

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