

TRANSCRIPT OF ITEM ON ABC'S PM 24 AUGUST 2010

MARK COLVIN: American scientists have found a link between a mouse leukaemia virus and the debilitating condition called chronic fatigue syndrome. The team of researchers from the National Institute of Health found the mouse retrovirus in 86 per cent of a group of chronic fatigue patients.

It's the second time that a mouse virus has been found in the blood samples of sufferers. But experts remain sceptical as scientists were unable to replicate the first discovery until now.

Jennifer Macey reports.

JENNIFER MACEY: Chronic fatigue sufferers say the condition is not just mere fatigue. It's more like bone-aching exhaustion.

SUSAN RIDGE: Tired is about a 2,000 billion understatement. (Laughs) If you can think about total and utter exhaustion then you're getting close. It should probably be called chronic exhaustion syndrome.

JENNIFER MACEY: Susan Ridge is a 55-year-old mother of three who came down with chronic fatigue nine years ago after a severe bout of the flu. She gave up a high-level job and is now the secretary of the ME/CFS Society, a support group for chronic fatigue sufferers.

SUSAN RIDGE: I never really recovered from the virus itself. And I felt nauseated all the time. And I felt exhausted when I woke up in the morning.

It was really embarrassing because I had quite a high-level job in the public service. I was you know having to run meetings for the heads of departments and things like that. And I just couldn't remember one word to the next. It was just dreadful trying to cope with no brain, no memory and feeling sick all day, every day.

So it was just a really horrible, devastating thing to happen because I was a keen sportswoman. You know I played tennis and softball and baseball and skied and you know lots of things. And then suddenly I couldn't do any of it.

JENNIFER MACEY: Now researchers in the US have discovered another link between a type of mouse virus and chronic fatigue syndrome.

The study is published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. The scientists show evidence of the murine leukaemia viruses which causes cancer in mice in 86 per cent of chronic fatigue sufferers.

Professor Andrew Lloyd from the University of New South Wales says it's an interesting development.

ANDREW LLOYD: They've found genetic sequences of the mouse leukaemia-related virus. Actually they've found a series of somewhat different sequences. So they weren't, this was not identification of a single uniform genetic sequence of a single virus. It was more detection of a genetic sequences of a closely related family of viruses.

JENNIFER MACEY: It's the second time in a year that scientists have identified mouse-related retroviruses in the blood samples of chronic fatigue patients. But the first study which found a different type of mouse virus could not be replicated in follow-up studies.

Professor Lloyd was a part of a team of researchers in Australia that first found a link between chronic fatigue and the Epstein-Barr virus which causes glandular fever and the Ross River virus.

ANDREW LLOYD: Is it plausible? One question is: is it plausible that this is really the answer to all chronic fatigue syndrome?

My feeling about that is that it's incredibly unlikely that that's the case because you'd have to propose that the Epstein-Barr virus infection that we've documented for instance is somehow not relevant to causing the illness when it's so clearly chronologically linked.

So at best you have to propose that MLV might either be the causative agent in a very small subset of patients or that it acts in some way as a kind of a co-factor, that you have two insults that somehow give rise to the illness overall. And there's some plausibility in that latter idea.

JENNIFER MACEY: But other chronic fatigue experts say the problem starts before the virus is contracted.

Dr Don Lewis a GP in Victoria who treats sufferers says people with genetic food allergies have a compromised immune system which makes them more susceptible to these viruses and chronic fatigue.

DON LEWIS: If you, if one uncovers in fact these predisposing conditions such as the immune imbalance and the genetic food intolerances, if those are uncovered then it is very likely that by paying attention to those dietary adjustments that there will be a significant improvement and lessening in the symptom profile that a person has.

JENNIFER MACEY: Meanwhile chronic fatigue sufferer Susan Ridge says any new research into the mysterious condition is welcome.

SUE RIDGE: Back in the older days, and there's still some doctors who believe that people with chronic fatigue syndrome, they've got the yuppie flu and they're just malingerers. They don't want to work.

It's just so wonderful that someone is actually doing some research into what makes us sick and keeps us sick for so long.

JENNIFER MACEY: She's calling for the government to provide more support for research and to help distribute information to doctors to investigate possible viruses that may be lingering in chronic fatigue patients.

MARK COLVIN: Jennifer Macey.