

More mental than anything?

For years sick building syndrome has been bandied around as an answer for high work absenteeism, dissatisfaction and general malaise in the workplace. A British study is now casting doubts on that theory – revealing the syndrome may be more mental than anything. *Johann Vannisselroy* spoke to some of those involved in the industry to see what the opinion was here in Australia.

British research has suggested that sick building syndrome may predominantly be a state of mind.

Modern buildings are typically sealed with no natural ventilation and it has been claimed they often become sick when things go wrong with the artificial ventilation – it may be inadequate or contaminated with chemicals from indoor or outdoor sources.

However, latest research has suggested this is a fallacy.

A recent study published in the journal *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* investigated more than 4000 middle-aged workers in 44 buildings around London.

They were given a list of 10 common symptoms of sick building syndrome and asked which, if any, they had experienced.

They also described the physical properties of their offices and the demands of their jobs, including how well supported they felt.

While they were each given a personal sick building syndrome score, most of the buildings were assessed by independent field workers who checked temperature, lighting, airborne pollution, humidity, ventilation and noise levels.

The results were that one in seven men and one in five women reported five or more symptoms of the syndrome.

But here's the killer punch – researchers found no significant relationship between most aspects of the physical work environment and the symptoms.

However, they did find that the biggest factors linked to the symptoms were job stress and lack of support at work.

And, contrary to expectation, workers in buildings with unacceptable levels of carbon dioxide, airborne fungi and noise were less likely to say they were ill, though previously these factors were thought to be the problem.

Symptoms were significantly associated with two psychosocial conditions: having a demanding job and lacking supportive colleagues.



Lousy job syndrome?...New research suggests sick building syndrome may be a misnomer.

“These results suggest that ‘sick building syndrome’ may be wrongly named,” the authors said.

“Raised symptom reporting appears to be due less to poor physical conditions than to a working environment characterised by poor psychosocial conditions.”

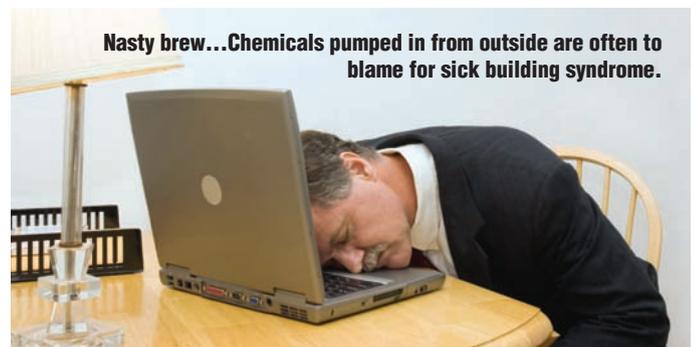
Air quality expert Clive Broadbent told *CCN* he was unsurprised by the research’s findings having spent many years arguing that exact case.

“It’s hogwash,” he said of sick building syndrome.

“It’s more to do with people not liking their workplace, their boss or being let down at work. It’s about them rather than the building or the air conditioning system.”

“There’s no sick buildings in Australia only air conditioning problems that can be readily fixed.”

He said an industry had been made by people preying



Nasty brew...Chemicals pumped in from outside are often to blame for sick building syndrome.

on others’ fears of the “sick building syndrome tag”.

“There’s good guys and there’s bad guys and there’s plenty of people going around making a living out of scaring people.”

He said higher than normal absenteeism can be an indicator of building problems.

“On the other hand, it may just be poor management. Listen to workers’ complaints,” he advised employers.

The subject was highly involved because human

beings were complex creatures with psychological as well as physical needs.

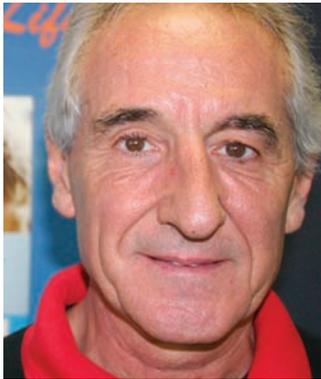
“Every electrical and mechanical system in the building may satisfy the specified technical requirements yet the occupants may have a low opinion of the building,” Broadbent said.

In contrast, the building could be somewhat decrepit, yet the occupants enthusiastic about it.

“Opinions of occupants may

be influenced by extraneous considerations such as historical links between the people and the building, or perhaps its geographical setting.”

Another important aspect not always given prominence was the need to personalise the individual workplace.



rather than indoor air quality.

Sprigg said in his experience indoor air quality was superior to the air outside as it was filtered to remove dust, bacteria, mould and fungi.

He agreed stress levels played a large part in the sickness – and had witnessed a case



because their livelihood depends on it.

“It’s one area that’s been spun out of control by vested interests and consultants who don’t have any scruples and make out a problem where there isn’t one.”

All this hysteria and spin really denies the benefits of an air conditioning system – and the fact these systems improve the quality of the air – whether it’s in the country or the city.”

But Sydney-based indoor air quality expert and Aironic director Gerald Marceau said the study was not entirely applic-

FAR LEFT: Gerald Marceau: “Sick building syndrome is very simple. It’s not something that we’re inventing.”
LEFT: Clive Broadbent: Sick building syndrome a load of “hogwash”.

ence, Sick Building Syndrome was becoming an increasing malady – and he said the causes were scientific.

“You’ve got millions of miles of ducting. The air conditioning system is turned off on Friday night through to Monday morning. The humidity and heat in the ducting is the perfect place for bacteria to grow and on Monday morning when the system is back on that all gets mixed in with the stale air.

“And then everyone feels like shit.”

Marceau pointed to CSIRO studies showing the airborne chemical cocktails Australians inhale in homes and offices costs the nation at least \$12 billion annually in lost productivity.

“It’s very simple. It’s not something that we’re inventing.”

Melaklean director Daniel Massaioli said many hundreds of measurements had shown him dirty air conditioning systems were often the cause of high absenteeism.

“It’s quite common but poorly recognised by the commercial sector. Those who have recognised and done something about it have benefited.

“Typically in most places it takes about three months to actually convince the maintenance people that it will actually achieve the result.

He said Australian standards indicating monthly cleans of air conditioning systems should be adhered to and this applied particularly to companies with a high turnover of people through its premises.

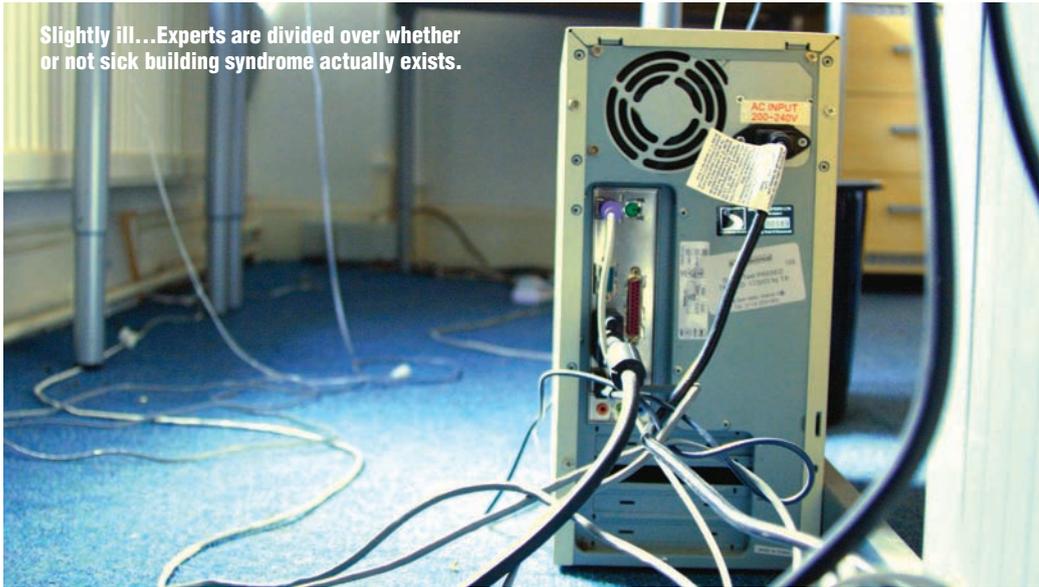
“It is a new industry here in Australia and we’re finding people are slow to recognise that there is a problem.

“What stands out is that other countries are far more advanced than Australia in addressing the issue of sick building syndrome and I think the sooner we recognise that we have our own air quality related issues in Australia the healthier we’ll be as a workforce.”

He said education campaigns initiated from a Government level could result in millions being saved and a healthier, happier workforce throughout the nation.

A spokesperson for Healthy Buildings International, a company specialising in sick building syndrome, said the company wished to make no comment for this story. ■

Slightly ill...Experts are divided over whether or not sick building syndrome actually exists.



“Individual control ability has a strong subjective impact which may do more than any of the objective factors to improve productivity in buildings.”

DASCEM environmental and engineering consultants engineer Graham Sprigg also agreed with the results of the study.

Personal experience had shown him humans could become hypersensitive to the issue of indoor air quality.

“They can get so overwhelmed by the emotion of the situation they can smell somebody’s perfume and have to sit down. The mentality is they smell anything and it’s the fault of the building and the air conditioning system.”

Transference of sickness was more likely to be as a result of contamination of lift buttons, telephones and keyboards

where a group of office workers made their way to hospital complaining of illness not long after a practice of evacuation procedures.

“There are probably the odd cases where it’s a result of indoor air quality – some people do get sensitive to certain chemicals and there may be genuine contamination of some systems – but it’s pretty rare.

“I read these articles in the paper and laugh.”

He said while checks provided a sideline income for his business, there were “unscrupulous” operators actively promoting fear to earn a buck.

“That’s the problem with consulting people. They have to drum up business. There’s always a temptation for people in those fields to spin things up

able to Australia as London had an entirely different approach to climate control.

“In Europe they don’t have air conditioning so they don’t draw the air from outside. Here we draw the air from outside containing chemicals in the urban areas and cycle it through the building. In London they rely on central heating and don’t draw air from outside as such.

“The Northern Hemisphere is different from the Southern Hemisphere. The countries closer to the equator need air conditioning so it’s a different story altogether.

Even then sick building syndrome could hit European workplaces with release of chemicals from the likes of photocopier machines and carpets.

Marceau said, in his experi-