

World News Roundup

Online

Activists silencing us: scientists

Activism and science 'fighting' it out online

LONDON, March 18, (RTRS): The emails, tweets and blog posts in the "abuse" folder that Michael Sharpe keeps on his computer continue to pile up. Eight years after he published results of a clinical trial that found some patients with chronic fatigue syndrome can get a little better with the right talking and exercise therapies, the Oxford University professor is subjected to almost daily, often anonymous, intimidation.

A Twitter user who identifies himself as a patient called Paul Watton (@thegodofpleasur) wrote: "I really am looking forward to his professional demise and his much-deserved public humiliation." Another, Anton Mayer (@MECFNews), likened Sharpe's behaviour to "that of an abuser."

Watton and Mayer have never been treated by Sharpe for their chronic fatigue syndrome, a little-understood condition that can bring crushing tiredness and pain. Nor have they met him, they told Reuters. They object to his work, they said, because they think it suggests their illness is psychological. Sharpe, a professor of psychological medicine, says that isn't the case. He believes that chronic fatigue syndrome is a biological condition that can be perpetuated by social and psychological factors.

Sharpe is one of around a dozen researchers in this field worldwide who are on the receiving end of a campaign to discredit their work. For many scientists, it's a new normal: From climate change to vaccines, activism and science are fighting it out online. Social media platforms are supercharging the battle.

Reuters contacted a dozen professors, doctors and researchers with experience of analysing or testing potential treatments for chronic fatigue syndrome. All said they had been the target of online harassment because activists objected to their findings. Only two had definite plans to continue researching treatments. With as many as 17 million people worldwide suffering this disabling illness, scientific research into possible therapies should be growing, these experts said, not dwindling. What concerns them most, they said, is that patients could lose out if treatment research stalls.

A spokesperson for Twitter said the platform "exists to serve the public conversation. Its strength lies in providing people with a diversity of perspectives into critical issues – all in real-time." Where someone used anonymity for bad purposes, Twitter would take immediate action, the spokesperson added.

Chronic fatigue syndrome, also known as myalgic encephalomyelitis, or CFS/ME, is described by specialists as a "complex, multisystem, and often devastating disorder." Symptoms include overwhelming fatigue, joint pain, headaches, sleep problems and isolation. It can render patients bed- or house-bound for years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, estimates the illness costs the US economy \$17 billion to \$24 billion annually in medical bills and lost incomes. It is thought to affect as many as 2.5 million people in the United States.

Identified

No cause has been identified, no formal diagnosis established and no cure developed. Many researchers cite evidence that talking therapies and behavioural approaches can help in some cases. Yet some patients and their advocates say this amounts to a suggestion that the syndrome might be a mental illness or psychosomatic, a notion that enrages them. They would prefer that research efforts focus on identifying a biological cause or diagnosis.

One of those leading the campaign against research into psychological therapies for CFS/ME is David Tuller, a former journalist with a doctor of public health degree from University of California, Berkeley. Tuller, who describes himself as an investigator, not a campaigner, told Reuters he wants to help CFS/ME patients.

Crowdfunded by a global band of CFS/ME sufferers, their families and patient activists, Tuller has since October 2015 published more than 140 blog posts amounting to tens of thousands of words attacking studies of psychological treatments and conferences that have showcased them. He's

recently complained to the CDC, New York's Columbia University and Netflix. In 2018, Netflix ran a docu-series about CFS/ME patients. It said it wanted to show the difficulties of patients "suffering from elusive and misunderstood illnesses."

Tuller refers to researchers who explore and test treatments for CFS/ME that feature a psychological element as "insane" and a "cabal" suffering from "mass delusion." They are bent on pursuing "bogus and really terrible research," he told Reuters.

Sharpe no longer conducts research into CFS/ME treatments, focusing instead on helping severely ill cancer patients. "It's just too toxic," he explained. Of more than 20 leading research groups who were publishing treatment studies in high-quality journals 10 years ago, Sharpe said, only one or two continue to do so.

Trials

The world's largest trials registry, clinicaltrials.gov, indicates that over the past decade there has been a decline in the number of new CFS/ME treatment trials being launched. From 2010 to 2014, 33 such trials started. From 2015 until the present, the figure dropped to around 20. This decline comes at a time when research into ways to help patients should be growing, not falling, because the condition is more widely recognised, scientists interviewed by Reuters said.

Reuters spoke to three specialists in CFS/ME in Britain, Denmark and the Netherlands who have reported receiving online abuse but continue to work in the field. The specialist in the Netherlands, a psychologist who works at a chronic fatigue treatment centre, said that a few years ago, research teams there had five treatment studies looking at cognitive behavioural therapies for CFS/ME patients. Now, they have no treatment studies at all. Junior researchers are wary of entering the field because of the abuse they've seen others suffer, said the specialist in Britain, a doctor who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Per Fink, a professor at the Research Clinic for Functional Disorders at Denmark's Aarhus University Hospital, said he kept going because he didn't want to let down patients, some severely ill, who are "open to any treatment that may help them."

The term myalgic encephalomyelitis was first used in 1956 to describe a condition associated with post-illness fatigue among patients at London's Royal Free Hospital. Thirty years later, the name chronic fatigue syndrome was coined. Now, the combination term CFS/ME is used by most people – patients, doctors and researchers – and by the US National Institutes of Health.

The trigger for the condition is not known, although it can follow a bout of severe illness or extreme physical endurance, or a viral infection such as glandular fever. There is no biomarker or blood test to establish diagnosis, and patients often face misunderstanding from family, friends and doctors. Patient advocates say the condition has a history of being dismissed as "yuppie flu" or plain indolence.

With no pharmacological or physiological treatments on the horizon, scientists and doctors explored psychiatry and psychology for ways to ease the symptoms. Some patients and campaigners say that diverted attention and funding away from scientific efforts to define what causes CFS/ME and how it can be properly diagnosed.

Simon Wessely, a professor of psychological medicine at King's College London and former president of Britain's Royal College of Psychiatrists, said he decided to stop conducting research into treatment approaches for CFS/ME several years ago because he felt the online abuse was detracting from his work with patients.

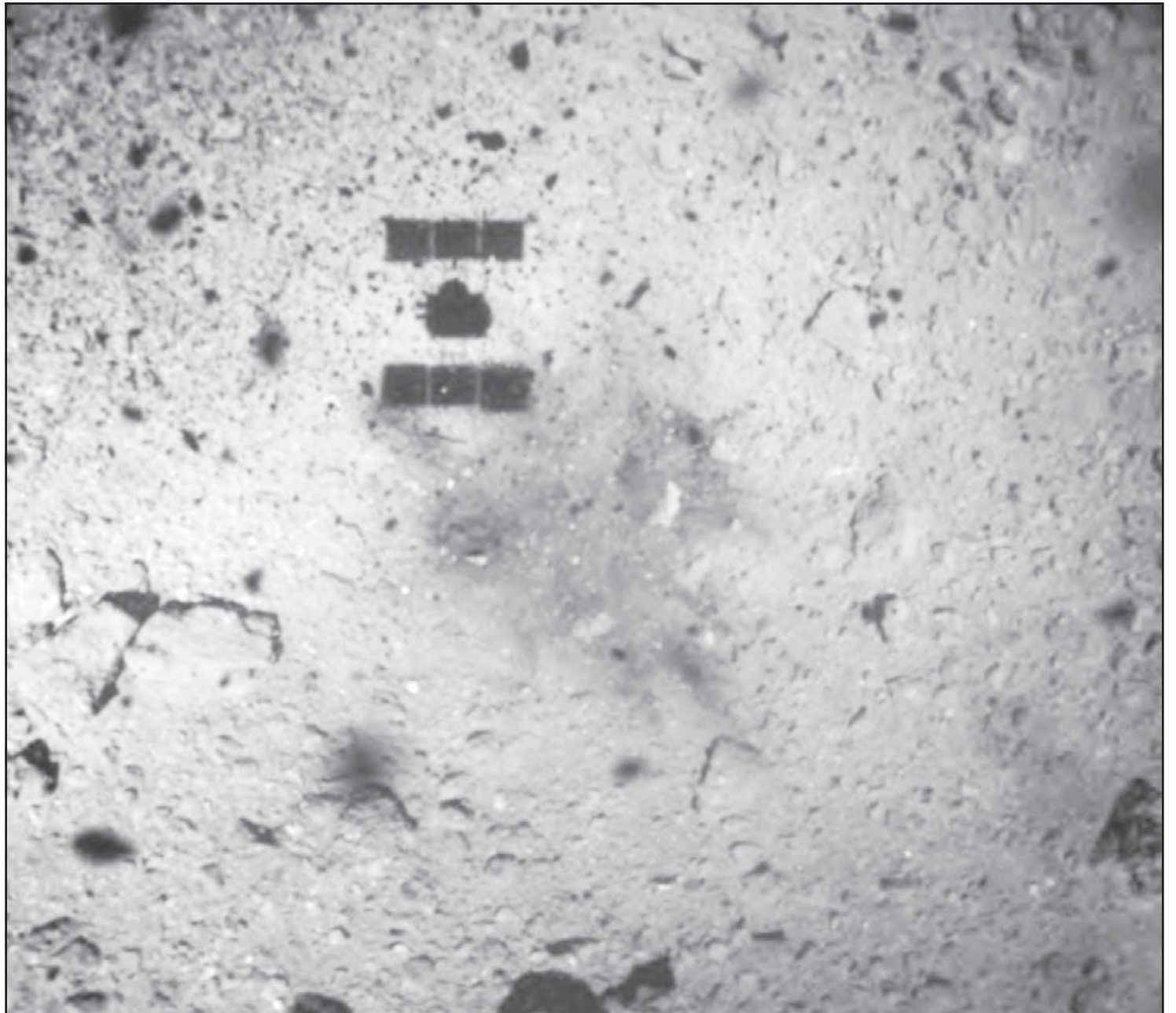
But he is still the subject of what he calls "relentless internet stalking." Recent tweets directed at Wessely include one accusing him of playing "pathetic ego driven games" with the lives of people with CFS/ME, another saying "Wessely is a dangerous and evil individual" and another saying "We die, b/c of u."

Wessely's employers at King's College London have taken advice on the potential risk and have instituted X-ray scans of his mail, he says. "Everything I say and do in public, and sometimes even in private, is pored over and scrutinised," he said.

Wessely's experiences are echoed by Aarhus University Hospital's Per Fink, who runs a clinic that offers patients exercise and talking therapies.



Sharpe



In this Feb 22, 2019 file photo, this image released by the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) shows the shadow (center above), of the Hayabusa2 spacecraft after its successful touchdown on the asteroid Ryugu. (AP)

Japan to make crater on asteroid to get samples from inside

Japan's space agency said Monday that its Hayabusa2 spacecraft will follow up last month's touchdown on a distant asteroid with another risky mission – to drop an explosive to make a crater and collect underground samples to get possible clues to the origin of the solar system.

Hayabusa2 made history on Feb 22 when it successfully touched down on the boulder-rich asteroid, where it also collected some surface fragments.

The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency said Hayabusa2 is to

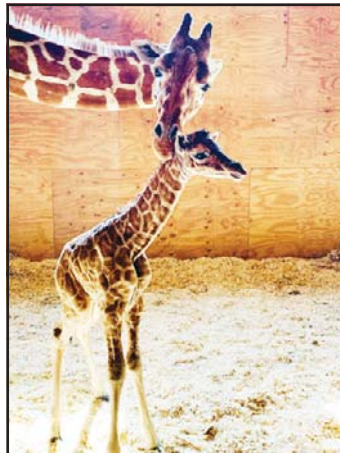
drop a copper impactor the size of a baseball and weighing 2 kilograms (4.4 pounds) on the asteroid on April 5 to collect samples from deeper underground where they had not been exposed to the sun or space rays.

The new mission will require an immediate evacuation of the spacecraft to the other side of the asteroid so it won't get hit by flying shards from the blast, JAXA said. While moving away, Hayabusa2 will leave a camera to capture the outcome.

The mission will allow JAXA

scientists to analyze details of a crater to find out the history of the asteroid, said Koji Wada, who is in charge of the project.

Hayabusa2 will start descending toward the asteroid the day before to carry out the mission from its home position of 20 kilometers (12 miles) above. It will drop a cone-shaped piece of equipment containing explosives that will blast off a copper plate on the bottom. It will turn into a ball and slam into the asteroid at the speed of 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) per second. (AP)



This photo provided by Animal Adventure Park shows April the Giraffe with her new male calf on March 16 in Harpursville, NY. The Animal Adventure Park said April gave birth to a healthy male calf on Saturday. They say more than 300,000 watched live.

Discovery

Regions seek support: China's cash-strapped regions are lobbying Beijing to loosen its purse strings to help fight pollution, saying they don't have the funds to meet state policies aimed at fixing the damage done by decades of unrestricted development.

The cost of environmental compliance was a major theme at this month's annual session of the National People's Congress, where thousands of non-binding recommendations submitted by delegates give an insight into the major preoccupations of legislators.

Beijing has been at pains to stress it will not ease up in the "war on pollution" launched five years ago by Premier Li Keqiang, even though the economy grew at its slowest rate since 1990 last year.

But with resources tight and controlling debt a priority, many parliamentary delegates called for more spending support from Beijing and a more "coordinated" approach to keeping pollution in check and the economy on track.

"We cannot stop or hinder economic development in order to pursue environmental protection," said delegate Pei Chunliang from central China's Henan province, which has struggled to find new sources of growth.

"In some regions the rules of economic development have not been respected," Pei warned in a proposal calling for more support for environmentally friendly firms.

For regions under pressure to meet smog targets or resolve long-standing environmental problems while trying to meet growth targets, immediate relief is seen as essential.

"There is a big gap between fiscal revenues and expenditure," said Zhang Leiming, mayor of the city of Pingdingshan in Henan, blaming the economic slowdown and the city's dependence on coal.

Zhang said his city had spent hundreds of billions of yuan to tackle problems like land subsidence, but it was "far from enough", and the state needed to establish a giant fund to help resource-dependent cities meet their goals.

Many regions called for state aid to rectify such longstanding pollution problems, with delegates from coal-producing regions like Shanxi lobbying for tax and debt relief.

Other regions are also struggling to implement new directives to prevent agricultural pollution and clean up rivers.

"Due to insufficient local financial resources and historical debts, it is difficult to meet the funding requirements," said delegate Yu Huiwen, head of the environment bureau in Sichuan prov-

Environment

More investment and research: leaders

Africa seeks new green dev model

BARCELONA, March 18, (RTRS): African countries must tackle climate change with a new economic model rooted in clean energy, forest protection and technology to support farmers – but they will need more investment and research to make that happen, leaders said on Thursday.

French President Emmanuel Macron, who hosted the "One Planet" climate summit in Nairobi, highlighted the example of West Africa's Solar Mamas, a group of female engineers who install solar systems in their villages.

Their work both improves their social position and brings renewable energy to local people, he said.

Africa cannot repeat the mistakes of the past made by industrialised nations that grew rich using power produced by burning dirty fossil fuels, such as oil and coal, he added.

"For me, the key to African emancipation is how we construct a new model" that aims to build a sustainable future for all, Macron told heads of governments, corporations, development banks and others gathered in the Kenyan capital.

Kenya, for example, already gets three-quarters of its power from renewable sources, including solar, geothermal and wind, he said.

At the summit, the third of its kind aimed at mobilising finance and other resources for global climate action, Kenya's president pledged his country would ensure forests covered at least 10 percent of its land by 2022.

Madagascar's President, Andry Rajoelina, said his government planned to grow trees in local nurseries so every inhabitant could plant at least five per year to re-occupy forest losses, and also would provide new cooking stoves that use less wood.

The World Bank Group's interim president, Kristalina Georgieva, said Africa had "the most incredible opportunity" to move onto a path of low-carbon economic growth.

It still produces only 1.5 percent of its electricity from solar power, compared with 7 percent in Germany, which has much less sun, for example.

Africa, while responsible for just 4 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, is struggling with the impacts of climate change – from drought to floods – with 65 percent of its people directly affected, she noted.

In response, the World Bank Group plans to spend at least \$12 billion in Africa from 2021-2025 to support adaptation and resilience projects, its officials said.

Those efforts would include helping get weather forecasts and insurance to poor farmers, as well as restoring degraded land and coastal mangroves, Georgieva said.

"I have faith that the men – and especially the women – of Africa will be the custodians of our beautiful planet," she told the summit.

Wanjiru Kamau-Rutenberg, director of African Women in Agricultural Research and Development, said there was a need to put women farmers, in particular, at the centre of research on how to adapt to a warming world, and Africa should develop its own scientific capacity to do that.

Those aims were being supported by a \$15-million partnership between her network, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the BNP Paribas Foundation and France to provide fellowships for 600 young scientists in Africa and Europe to work on climate change, she said.

"It is absolutely critical to increase the numbers of women – especially African women – who are leading research," she added.

United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed said far more money – including private cash – was required to ensure Africa could "grow green" and not "grow brown".

"We are telling the world we need trillions (of dollars), but the investment flows are not travelling at the speed they need to, at the scale they need to, and we need to do something about unlocking it," she added.

Many African and other developing countries had prepared climate change action plans and strengthened their governance to be able to attract more finance, she noted.

To coincide with the summit, the London-based International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) issued a report showing how billions of dollars in climate finance could be used more effectively to help people pursue green development, whether they live in urban slums or rural forests.

Not enough climate finance – less than 10 percent – was reaching local communities in poor, vulnerable nations, it said.

The paper explored how three locally developed funds had set up their own mechanisms to distribute small amounts of cash to groups – from slum-dwelling families in Zimbabwean cities to women palm-nut collectors in Brazil – to help resolve the diverse problems holding them back.

Most climate projects funded by international donors are designed by distant experts, often miss local priorities and struggle to respond to new opportunities, IIED said.

A significant share of money also goes on administration costs, diverting it from helping communities adapt to climate change and develop low-carbon economies, IIED said.



Li



Pei

ince, which is responsible for protecting the upstream area of the Yangtze.

The finance ministry said in its report to parliament this month that it will allocate 25 billion yuan (\$3.7 billion) to a smog prevention fund this year, a 25 percent increase on 2018, and 30 billion yuan to treat water pollution, up 45 percent.

Environment minister Li Ganjie, who acknowledged earlier this year

that some regions were struggling with the "historical burdens" of polluting industries, also told a briefing during the parliamentary session that China would provide more support for local governments.

The government was "currently studying and preparing to adopt new measures," he said, but added it wasn't just about money, but also policies and technical guidance. (RTRS)