

CFS/ME – a grandchild of neurasthenia? Reflections on the mobilization of history in current medical debates

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Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), also known as myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME), is a contested condition and diagnostic label. Since the first medical definition of CFS in 1988, there has been a continuous – and at times fierce – medical and public debate about almost every aspect of the disorder. The debate has been particularly polarized when it comes to etiology: Should CFS/ME be perceived as an illness of mental and emotional origin, or is it a somatic, organic and ‘real’ disease?

In these debates, it has sometimes been argued that CFS/ME actually is ‘old news’, and merely a recent ‘reincarnation’ of neurasthenia; a diagnostic label and condition which was widespread in the Western world around the turn of the 19th century. Similarities between the two diagnostic categories have been pointed out in terms of clinical picture as well as etiological explanations, and in the present paper I will explore the use of such comparisons further.

Drawing on texts about the relationship between CFS/ME and neurasthenia from the late 1980s and up until the present, my main aim is to show how the history of neurasthenia has been mobilized in the debate on CFS/ME. Some of the question to be asked, are: How has the historical neurasthenia been portrayed in recent ‘biographies’ of CFS/ME, and for what purpose(s) has neurasthenia been included in these current debates? Does it make sense at all, to perform comparisons between present-day and historical disorders? If so, what can be gained, and what are the possible pitfalls?