

Emotional trauma and fear most likely cause of 'Havana Syndrome'

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The cause of the mystery illness among US and Canadian diplomats in Havana is most likely to be emotional trauma and fear according to a leading sociologist and an expert in neurodegenerative diseases, writing in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*.

Concussion-like symptoms, including headaches, dizziness, nausea and fatigue, were initially reported among dozens of US embassy staff between late 2016 and June 2018. They were described by the US State Department as 'medically confirmed symptoms' and government physicians suspected the involvement of a sonic device. Studies on the embassy patients, however, have been inconclusive and contradictory. A similar array of symptoms was reported in over two dozen Canadian diplomats during this same period.

The paper's lead author, Dr. Robert Bartholomew, concludes that 'Havana Syndrome' is more akin to shell shock, with the symptoms paralleling those associated with war trauma. "A characteristic feature of combat syndromes over the past century is the appearance of an array of neurological complaints from an overstimulated nervous system that are commonly misdiagnosed as concussions and brain damage", he writes. He adds: "A signature feature of shell shock was concussion-like symptoms. Like today, their appearance initially baffled physicians until a more careful review of the data determined that what they were seeing was an epidemic of psychogenic illness. In fact, some of the descriptions from 100 years ago are virtually identical, right down to the use of the phrase 'concussion-like symptoms'."

Dr. Bartholomew is a medical sociologist based in Auckland, New Zealand. The report was co-authored by Dr. Robert W. Baloh, Director of the Neurotology Laboratory at the UCLA Medical Center. The authors describe the diplomats who became sick as participants in a continuation of the Cold War, living in a hostile foreign country where they were under constant surveillance. Between late 2016 and 2017, staff in Havana were living in a cauldron of stress and uncertainty, amid rumours of an enigmatic sonic weapon.

"The political and [scientific evidence](#) for the perpetration of an attack on US embassy staff in Cuba is inconclusive," they write. "What is the more likely, that the diplomats were the target of a mysterious new weapon for which there is no concrete evidence, or they were suffering from psychogenic symptoms generated by stress? The evidence overwhelmingly points to the latter."

They add: "There have been four separate studies of 'Havana Syndrome' to date. Each have critical design flaws including the use of inappropriate controls, inflated conclusions, and a lack of evidence for exposure to an energy source or toxin. None adequately test the hypotheses they propose, while promoting exotic explanations that are not supported by the facts. Our conclusions are grounded in the prosaic and known science. There is no need to resort to exotic explanations. Claims that the patients were suffering from brain and auditory damage are not borne out by the data."

More information: Robert E Bartholomew et al, Challenging the diagnosis of 'Havana Syndrome' as a novel clinical entity, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0141076819877553](https://doi.org/10.1177/0141076819877553)

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