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Often misdiagnosed, chronic fatigue is debilitating, but it can be treated

Stress is a killer. It causes heart attacks, high blood pressure and asthma. But of all the physical and mental disorders stress causes, chronic fatigue immune dysfunction syndrome (CFIDS) remains one of the least understood.

Also known as yuppie flu, the syndrome is described by the World Health Organisation as a disease of the nervous system. There is no simple diagnostic test, but symptoms include fatigue that can persist for at least six months, headaches, memory lapses, depression, blurred vision and interrupted sleeping patterns.

"It usually strikes people who have an 'A-type' personality and are high achievers," says Dr Nash Petrovic, one of the few specialists treating the illness in SA. "This makes it especially difficult for them when they can't continue their busy lifestyles."

CFIDS has defied explanation. Some researchers say it is a virus, while others say it is caused by a viral infection.

"Many physicians are not familiar with the disease," he says. "It's often mistaken for depression." He says that after the initial illness, most sufferers follow a course of relapsing and remitting over several years. "Some gradually recover, but never fully. A small number steadily deteriorate and eventually become severely disabled."

The British ME Association estimates that the disease affects about 2%-3% of the population and that only one in five sufferers makes a complete recovery. One in 20 become chair or bed-ridden. The disease is also on the increase among children and is one of the fastest-growing reasons for disability claims worldwide.

"Though [sufferers] can wake up feeling well, they can be incapacitated by the effort required by as simple an act as dressing — made worse by physical or emotional stress."

Petrovic inadvertently found himself specialising in CFIDS after he found that a mixture of antioxidant vitamins and micronutrients he was using to treat heart disease patients had a positive effect on patients suffering from CFIDS. "In 1994, I gave the regime to someone who had been suffering from CFIDS for 10 years.

She began to feel better within days."

Though he can't divulge the exact ingredients in his protocol, Petrovic says the combination of vitamins and antioxidants is individually tailored to treat each patient's specific symptoms. He also says environmental factors, such as exposure to pollution and diet, play an important role in recovery.

But rather than suggesting diets which exclude major food groups such as sugar, wheat and dairy (a common treatment suggested by alternative practitioners), Petrovic says apply common sense to eating patterns. "Eat as many fruits and vegetables as possible, avoid smoking and caffeine and try not to microwave food."

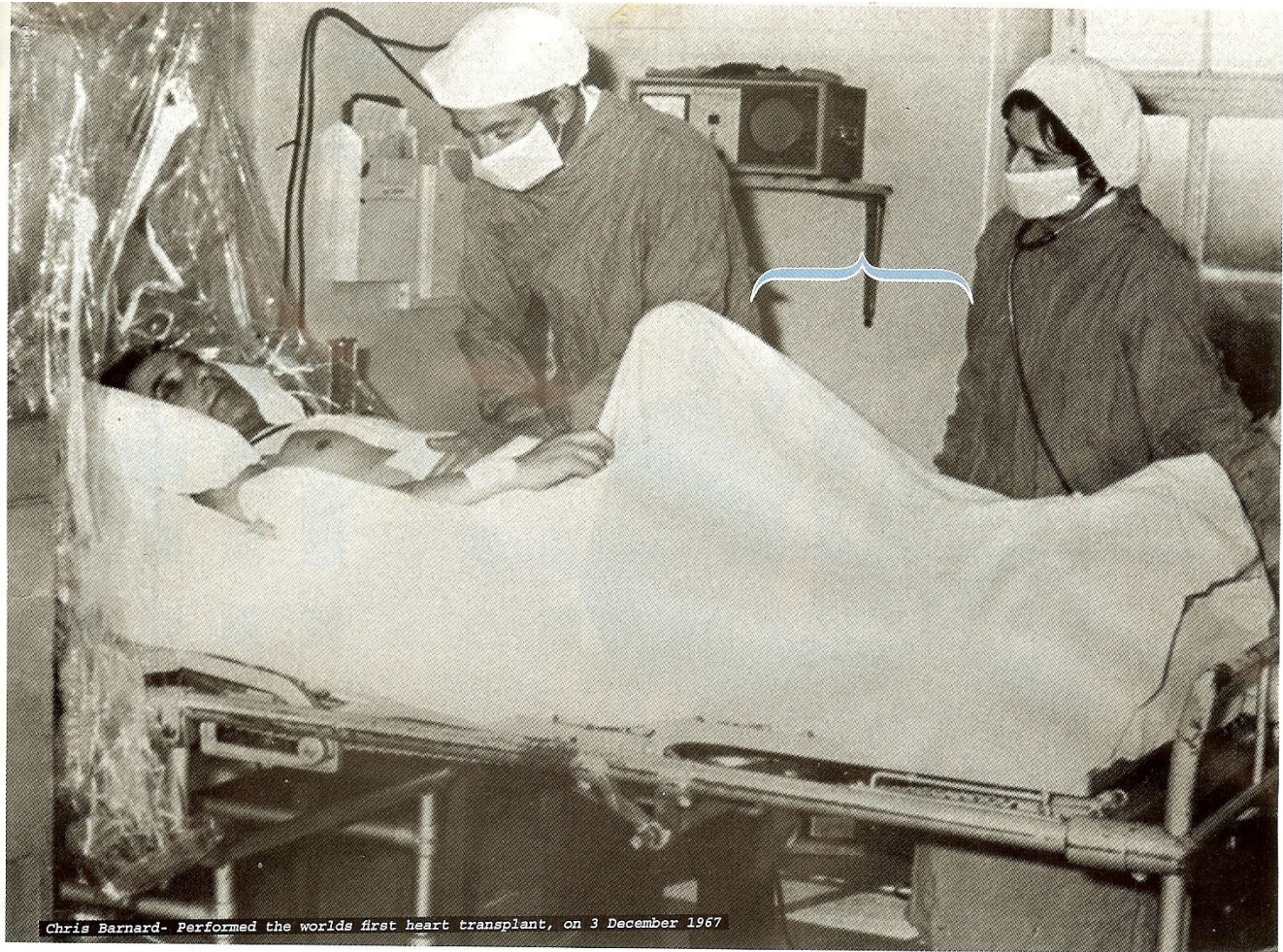
He says because of the controversy over CFIDS, there has been scepticism from doctors and other medical specialists, who find it difficult to believe that a programme of nonprescriptive micronutrients cannot only make CFIDS patients feel better, but actually reverse CFIDS completely. "The regimen has a success rate of more than 90%," he says.

Petrovic now co-ordinates treatment to patients across the UK, the US and Australia.

Jacqui Pile

WHAT IT MEANS

> A mixture of antioxidant vitamins and micronutrients has been proven to offer relieve



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