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Was TV star’s disease born of B.C. virus?

Four from sitcom have Parkinson’s

BY ROD MICKLEBURGH, VANCOUVER

Was the Parkinson’s disease that Canadian actor Michael J. Fox has battled for the past dozen years caused by a virus he picked up on a long-ago, CBC-TV sitcom?

It is possible, according to a new television documentary that says Mr. Fox is one of four members of the short-lived *Leo and Me* sitcom to subsequently be diagnosed with the degenerative disease.

Donald Calne, director of the Neurodegenerative Disorder Centre at the University of B.C. Hospital, said the rare patient cluster lends support to an emerging theory that viral infections could be one of the causes of Parkinson’s disease.

"If it’s all correct, yes, I think so," said Dr. Calne, who is treating two patients who worked with Mr. Fox on the 12-episode comedy that was broadcast in British Columbia in 1978.

"They told me they knew him when they were with him in television out here," he said yesterday.

"If the TV documentary is correct, and there are actually four patients with Parkinson’s disease from that show, it certainly makes one a bit suspicious."

Dr. Calne said recent studies have found that there is a higher risk of developing Parkinson’s among teachers and health-care workers, both of whom are in regular contact with people susceptible to influenza.

Other workers who spend a large amount of time close to each other, such as loggers forced to sleep in bunkhouses, are also high on the Parkinson’s risk list, said Dr. Calne, an expert on the disease.

"This could be because there is an infectious agent."

He said researchers now regard genetic background as a factor in only a small number of Parkinson’s cases. The fact that several members of the same family may get the disease could be more indicative of the risk of sharing a similar environment, Dr. Calne added.

Increasingly, research is focusing on theories that Parkinson’s may be triggered by a single event, such as a toxic attack or something as simple as a virulent strain of influenza.

Dr. Calne said there is no way of determining precisely why four workers on the same production crew would develop Parkinson’s. "But they may have been in close proximity, like a family, for a long period of time."

In the documentary, to be run on CTV April 7, he says: "We think that there may be quite transient, brief exposures to the environment that do damage and are then over. But the damage leads to premature death of cells in the brain."

Leo and Me was filmed on location with a Vancouver film crew. Among the actors was fast-talking 16-year-old "Mike Fox" from suburban Burnaby in his first TV job.

The show did not air on the full CBC network until 1981.

Jerry Thompson, writer and director of the documentary, entitled *The Parkinson’s Enigma*, said the significance of the CBC cluster will likely never be known. "It is a very curious and interesting question, but it could be nothing more than chance."

The main thrust of the documentary, said Mr. Thompson, is about the science of unravelling what causes Parkinson’s disease.

Mr. Fox does not refer to the cluster in the documentary, but he talks movingly about how the disease has changed him.

"There’s discomfort. It’s progressive. I can’t do all the things that I used to do. But at the same time, too, it’s .... changed me so fundamentally. It’s been a gift in the sense that it’s really opened me up to not taking things for granted, for having a more empathetic view of other people’s situations."

With a report from Robert Matas

The article EM0214 reprinted above is used in Chapter 14 of the STAT 231 Course Materials.