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Man With Few Trade Center Ties Traces His Asthma to 9/11

By KIRK JOHNSON

Glenn H. Abatemarco got sick two weeks after terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, and he has still not fully recovered his ability to breathe normally.

That in itself is not terribly unusual. A lot of people in Lower Manhattan who were exposed to the acrid, alkaline dust and smoke from ground zero developed the persistent pattern of lung irritation known as World Trade Center Cough.

But Mr. Abatemarco does not fit the pattern, and therein lies a medical mystery.

First of all, he lives in Brooklyn, miles from ground zero, and works in Midtown Manhattan, where he is a vice president at a financial services firm. He had no intense exposure from the dust cloud from the towers' collapse and no chronic exposure afterward of the sort that downtown workers and residents faced as smoke from the smoldering fires swirled through the streets.

He is 41 and generally fit, his physicians say, and while he had asthma as a younger man, he had not been bothered by it for 17 years.

But he got sick anyway, and did not get well. The only explanation his doctors have been able to come up with — after three trips to the emergency room, a CT scan, a battery of allergy tests, a second medical opinion, dozens of days of lost work and a six-week exile in Arizona last fall to try a desert cure — is the date his symptoms began.

In the scientific borderland where environmental medicine, epidemiology and diagnosis intersect, cases like Mr. Abatemarco's are called outliers.

Sometimes, physicians and public health researchers say, outliers can be canaries in the coal mine, pointing the way to new interpretations and broader understanding of the

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Brian A Barbour for The New York Times
Glenn H. Abatemarco went into self-imposed medical exile in Arizona, but his respiratory problems, which he said he believed were related to the World Trade Center attack, returned when he came back home.

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Scientists adapt NASA technology to create "smart bed" sleep surface



impact of an ecological disaster. Other times, they illuminate only the idiosyncrasies of one immune system. Either way, outliers suffer alone.

Mr. Abatamarco's medical journey began on Sept. 11 with what at first seemed like only a glancing blow on his life, compared with the devastation suffered by others.

As he and three co-workers were fleeing the city — heading for Brooklyn in an open-top Jeep — they were coated with material blowing from the site. (None of the co-workers, as far as he knows, became ill.) Dust, visible every morning on his car, also blew around his home in Bensonhurst over the next four or five days. And he was under severe stress in those days, he said — along with almost every other New Yorker — and stress is known to be a trigger for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease with severe persistent asthma, which is his formal diagnosis.

Beyond that, however, his doctors have thrown up their hands as to exactly what he may have breathed, where he breathed it and how the strange and scattered dots of his medical odyssey should be connected. "There's a temporal relation," said his pulmonary specialist, Dr. Valdemir T. Sentome. "We didn't find evidence of anything else except that at the time of exposure his condition deteriorated."

Mr. Abatamarco said that before the chain of events began, he was able to tolerate the complex array of environmental assaults that New York normally dishes out: pollution, high humidity and pollen. After 9/11, he became more susceptible, as though he had become, in a way, allergic to the very air around him, or to the city itself.

"My doctor's diagnosis was that whatever I had sucked in on 9/11 just hypersensitized me," he said.

Public health experts say that Mr. Abatamarco's illness underlines how little is known about the consequences of the terror attack. Although a base of expertise and knowledge has developed around the firefighters, downtown workers and residents who got sick, no one can say exactly where the borders of the disaster are. And the questions, they say, go beyond medicine.

Is Mr. Abatamarco a crime victim, for example? Is he entitled to compensation from the State of New York for the thousands of dollars he has spent on medications, not to mention his stay in Arizona, which was not covered by insurance? Or is he just a man who through misfortune and happenstance became ill?

And most important of all, perhaps: are there others like him?

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