Introduction
The guideline on non-specific, functional and somatoform physical complaints provides practical interdisciplinary recommendations; the aim is to improve the understanding of biopsychosocial disease and facilitate early recognition, prevention and therapy. When the guideline was compiled, the available body of evidence was quite heterogeneous due to the breadth of the topic; moreover, the level of evidence for many of the topics addressed was only moderate. Nevertheless, a strong consensus was reached among the 30 involved professional associations and patient representative bodies [1–3].

Principal symptoms include pain at different localisations, disturbance of organ function (digestion, cardiovascular system, breathing, urogenital system) and can include vegetative symptoms such as exhaustion/fatigue [4]; basically, symptoms can occur in every organ. Many somatic disciplines have therefore formulated their own functional syndromes; in gynaecology these include chronic pelvic pain, vulvodynia, chronic vaginal pruritus/chronic vaginal discharge, dysmenorrhea and dyspareunia.

S3 Guideline “Management of Patients with Non-Specific, Functional and Somatoform Physical Complaints” – What is Important for Gynaecological Practice?

S3-Leitlinie „Umgang mit Patienten mit nicht-spezifischen, funktionellen und somatoformen Körperbeschwerden“ – Was ist bedeutend für die gynäkologische Praxis?

Authors
F. Siedentopf, C. Hausteiner-Wiehle

Affiliations
1 Martin-Luther-Krankenhaus, Frauenklinik, Berlin
2 Berufsgenossenschaftliche Klinik Murnau, klinik und Poliklinik für Psychosomatische Medizin der Technischen Universität, München

Key words
- gynaecology
- somatoform physical complaints
- primary psychosomatic care
- chronic pelvic pain in women

Schlüsselwörter
- Gynäkologie
- somatoform Körperbeschwerden
- psychosomatische Grundversorgung
- chronischer Unterbauchschmerz der Frau

Abstract
When the guideline was compiled, the available evidence was heterogeneous; the evidence varied depending on the subject addressed and was often of only moderate quality. Nevertheless, a strong consensus was reached on almost all subjects. It is recommended that physicians develop a collaborative working relationship with the patient, focus on symptoms and coping strategies and avoid making stigmatising comments. A biopsychosocial diagnostic evaluation with a sensitive discussion of the signs of psychosocial stress allows problems of this type and comorbid conditions to be recognised early on and reduces the risk of iatrogenic somatisation. In uncomplicated cases, establishing a biopsychosocial explanatory model and physical/social activation are recommended. More serious cases call for collaborative, coordinated management with regular appointments (as opposed to ad-hoc appointments when the patient feels worse), gradual activation and psychotherapy. The comprehensive treatment plan can be multimodal and can potentially include physical management strategies, relaxation techniques and antidepressants.

Zusammenfassung

Bibliography
DOI http://dx.doi.org/10.1055/s-0032-1328381
Geburtsh Frauenheilk 2013; 73: 224–226 © Georg Thieme Verlag KG Stuttgart · New York · ISSN 0016-5751

Correspondence
Dr. med. Friederike Siedentopf
Martin-Luther-Krankenhaus, Frauenklinik Caspar-Theyß-Straße 27–31 14193 Berlin friederike.siedentopf@gmx.de
Recent etiopathogenetic models take the complex interactions between psychosocial, biological, iatrogenic/medical and socio-cultural factors as their starting point. These interactions can lead to neurobiological changes due to a combination of the patient’s disposition and the triggers, and can result in a chronicification of symptoms [1–5].

Approach and counselling: focus on empathy, biopsychosocial factors and coping strategies

The basic approach should aim for an empathetic understanding of symptoms in the context of the patient’s situation. It should take account of somatic and psychosocial aspects with the aim of improving the patient’s quality of life and performance (rather than insisting on explanations and remedies for symptoms) [1–3]. Therapists should offer a positive description of symptoms (for example, “non-specific”, “functional”, “physical stress”, or another suitable diagnosis) and should avoid comments which play down the condition (“There is nothing wrong with you”) or stigmatising descriptions (“hysteria”) [1–3, 6, 7]. Reassurance is important: patients should be reassured that symptoms are unlikely to progress to serious disease and that no unsuitable measures will be taken (“nil nocere”) [1–3, 8, 9]. Therapists should use open questions which allow the patient to choose the aspect she wishes to describe first herself; such questions promote the flow of discussion, encourage the patient to cooperate with the therapist and signal that the therapist wishes to work together with the patient. Attentiveness and interest should be indicated through verbal and nonverbal signs (“active listening”) [1–3].

Diagnostics: favourable prognostic factors, characteristics of more severe courses

A biopsychosocial diagnostic approach is recommended which focuses on the psychosocial context and simultaneously excludes important somatic differential diagnoses [1–3]. When taking the patient’s history it is important to discover whether other physical and psychological complaints are present in addition to the main presenting symptoms. Triggers, coping strategies and the current level at which the patient can function in daily life need to be investigated. The somatic diagnosis needs careful planning and should not be redundant; it should include regular physical examinations but avoid unnecessary and potentially injurious measures. Examinations and examination results should be discussed in a way that will discourage any tendency to focus on catastrophic outcomes.

Certain protective factors (“green flags”) are likely to have a positive prognostic impact and should be noted and encouraged (Table 1). Characteristics indicative of a more serious course (“yellow flags”) (Table 2), and warning signals including suicidal tendencies which indicate a potentially dangerous course (“red flags”) (Table 3) should be repeatedly assessed, and treatment needs to be adapted accordingly [4]. The diagnosis may also include co-morbid disorders such as functional or somatoform disorders.

Table 1 Protective factors (“green flags”) (based on [1–4, 10, 11]).

| Active coping strategies (e.g. physical exercise, positive approach to life, motivated for psychotherapy) |
| Healthy lifestyle (enough sleep, well-balanced diet, exercise and relaxation) |
| Secure attachments, social support |
| Good working conditions |
| Successful relationship between therapist and patient |
| Biopsychosocial approach which avoids unnecessary measures and discourages any tendency to focus on catastrophic outcomes |
| Access to healthcare which focuses on personal responsibility and prevention |

Table 2 Clinical characteristics of a more serious course (“yellow flags”) (based on [1–4, 10, 11]).

| Several symptoms (poly-symptomatic course) |
| No or only rare/short periods without symptoms |
| Severe fear of disease |
| Highly dysfunctional utilization of healthcare services, defensive avoidance strategies |
| Incapacity to work > 4 weeks, social withdrawal |
| High levels of stress in current situation and in prior history |
| Severe psychological co-morbidities (depression, anxiety, PTSD, addiction, personality disorder) |
| Patient-physician relationship experienced as “difficult” (by both parties), frustrating, treatment frequently discontinued |
| Iatrogenic somatisation (e.g. focus on catastrophic outcomes, invasive procedures which are not indicated) |

Table 3 Warning signals for a preventable severe course (“red flags”) (based on [1–4, 10, 11]).

| Suicidal tendencies |
| Serious psychological co-morbidities (e.g. severe depressive episode(s), anxiety symptoms which prevent the patient from leaving the house) |
| Indications of serious self-harming behaviour (insisting on surgery) and/or iatrogenic intervention |
| Very severe symptoms resulting in physical damage: fixedated on unhelpful/harmful behaviour, strong weight gain, limited mobility |
| Presence of well-known warning signals for somatically defined disease (cf. guidelines for somatic disciplines) |

General Therapeutic Recommendations

Therapy will depend on the severity of symptoms and the clinical characteristics [4, 12, 13]. For most female patients with non-specific, functional and somatoform physical complaints, their first port of call will be their general practitioner [14, 15], but if symptoms have a gynaecological aspect women are likely to turn first to their gynaecologist (“the woman’s GP”). If psychological and somatic co-morbidities are present, these co-morbid conditions require appropriate treatment in accordance with the guidelines. For less serious conditions, establishing a biopsychosocial explanatory model and physical/social activation are recommended. Symptoms and findings should be explained descriptively and rechecked with the patient, and the connection between physiology and psychology needs to be communicated to the patient (psychoeducation: e.g. stress physiology, vicious circle model). It is useful to begin by building on the patient’s subjective theory about her illness and use it to develop a biopsychosocial explanatory model [1].
Serious cases require longer term monitoring and cooperative, coordinated management with regular appointments (which should take place whether the patient is symptomatic or not), staged physical and social activation, and psychotherapy (using a wide range of data and a moderate effect size for cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic-interpersonal or hypnotherapeutic/imaginative therapy). The comprehensive treatment plan can be multimodal, and include body-oriented/non-verbal and relaxation techniques (ideally, activating techniques which can also be done at home) as well as pharmacotherapy for a limited period of time; if the predominant symptom is pain, treatment with anti-depressants may be helpful.

The therapy offered by the somatic physician or gynaecologist should consist of "psychosomatic basic care" and – if the physician/gynaecologist is qualified to do so – targeted psychotherapy [1].

Table 4 lists typical indications for inpatient treatment based on the clinical course (decisions must be made on a case-by-case clinical basis!).

### Conclusion
In conclusion, simultaneous biopsychosocial diagnostics can help recognize problems of this type early on and prevent additional "iatrogenic somatisation" using collaborative interpersonal communication and careful diagnostic planning. Treatment depends on the severity of disease and should be coordinated by the patient’s gynaecologist ("woman’s GP"). It requires the active participation of the patient and the cooperation of all attendant healthcare professionals.

In addition to background comments and sources, the long version of the guideline includes practical advice and numerous suggestions on phrases to use. Both the long and short versions of the accompanying patient guideline focus on information and suitable self-help measures: www.awmf.org/leitlinien/detail/ll/051-001.html

### References
7. Stone J, Wojcik W, Durrance D et al. What should we say to patients with symptoms unexplained by disease? The "number needed to offend". BMJ 2002; 325: 1449–1450

### Acknowledgement
We would like to thank the other authors (Rainer Schoefert, Winfried Häuser, Joram Ronel, Markus Herrmann and Peter Henningson) of the condensed version of the guideline, published in November 2012 in the Deutsches Ärzteblatt [1], on which this article is based, and also to thank all persons who contributed to developing the long version of the guideline.

### Conflict of Interest
C. Hausteiner-Wiehle: None.

F. Siedentopf has received speaker’s fees from the companies Roche, GlaxoSmithKline and Dr. Kade-Besins.