

OPINION

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Joni Mitchell, who was rushed to hospital last week, suffers from a condition called Morgellons

## Ailment that's not 'all in the mind'

What diseases do musicians fall victim to? That was the fascinating question answered by a study last week. Yes, rappers get murdered and heavy metal stars commit suicide, but the chances of a long life are good for folk, jazz and country singers, who tend to succumb to everyday diseases of old age – cancer and heart disease, rather than a rock 'n' roll lifestyle.

I thought about that study when Joni Mitchell was rushed to hospital last week. The 71-

year-old songwriter's condition hasn't been confirmed, but in the past she has said she has a bizarre disease called Morgellons, in which sufferers report unhealed lesions, "fibres" protruding from their skin and itching and crawling sensations.

Like Ebola, Morgellons preys on our worst fears – it's a condition straight out of science fiction that seems impossible to cure. And when it affects a star of Mitchell's stature, it is no surprise there's been pressure to carry out research into the condition. Yet for 10 years

scientists have failed to find a physical cause, and view it as a psychiatric disorder, much to the frustration of sufferers.

This doesn't mean a cause won't one day be found – after all, chronic fatigue syndrome was disputed for many years – or that Morgellons doesn't "exist". But it says more about how our society sees physical and psychological conditions; if we treated them equally, and accepted how they intertwine, perhaps more people would be willing to believe those who really are suffering.