Public Health and Epidemiology: Open Access ISSN:3068-9139

PRIME OPEN ACCESS

Volume 2, Issue 2

Review Article

Date of Submission: 13 Apr, 2026
Date of Acceptance: 12 May, 2026
Date of Publication: 22 May, 2026

The Knox Framework: Autonomic Vulnerability as a Disease-Modifying Substrate Across Cardiac, Gastrointestinal, and Post-Viral Syndromes

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Citation: Knox, B. H. (2026). The Knox Framework: Autonomic Vulnerability as a Disease-Modifying Substrate Across Cardiac, Gastrointestinal, and Post-Viral Syndromes. *Public Health Epidemiol OA, 2*(2), 01-05.

Abstract

Emerging clinical observations across cardiology, gastroenterology, and post-viral syndromes suggest that autonomic dysregulation may represent an under-recognised disease-modifying substrate rather than merely a secondary physiological disturbance. The Knox Hypothesis proposes that cumulative autonomic insults—including viral injury, haemodynamic compromise, and surgical trauma—can produce long-term instability in parasympathetic regulation, particularly through vagal network disruption.

This paper introduces the Knox Framework, an integrative conceptual model proposing that progressive autonomic priming creates systemic vulnerability across multiple organ systems. The framework synthesises five previously described mechanisms: autonomic priming following viral injury, vagal-mediated gastrointestinal dysregulation, impaired cardiovascular reflex stability, post-viral dysautonomia, and heightened autonomic sensitivity to inflammatory stimuli.

Within this model, autonomic instability functions as a cross-system amplifier, linking seemingly disparate clinical phenomena including cardiac arrhythmia susceptibility, eosinophilic oesophagitis symptom variability, post-viral fatigue syndromes, and fluctuating haemodynamic tolerance.

The Knox Framework suggests that autonomic vulnerability should be considered a potential disease-modifying state capable of shaping symptom expression across multiple conditions without necessarily producing structural pathology detectable through conventional diagnostic pathways.

Recognition of autonomic vulnerability as a systemic substrate may open new directions for research into functional disorders, post-viral syndromes, and patient-reported physiological instability.

Keywords: Autonomic Dysfunction, Vagal Instability, Post-Viral Dysautonomia, Functional Disease Mechanisms, Eosinophilic Oesophagitis, Cardiac Arrhythmia, Systems Physiology, Patient-Led Hypothesis

Introduction

The autonomic nervous system regulates essential physiological processes including cardiovascular stability, gastrointestinal motility, and inflammatory signalling. Despite its central regulatory role, autonomic dysfunction is frequently considered secondary to primary disease rather than as a primary driver of systemic physiological instability.

Recent clinical observations across multiple disciplines—including cardiology, gastroenterology, and infectious disease—suggest that autonomic dysregulation may contribute to the emergence or persistence of complex symptom syndromes.

The Knox Hypothesis series has proposed that sequential physiological insults may progressively impair autonomic resilience. These insults may include:

- viral infection
- acute haemodynamic stress
- surgical intervention

• prolonged inflammatory activation

Together these events may create a state of autonomic priming, in which regulatory networks become more vulnerable to disruption.

This paper introduces the Knox Framework, an integrative model proposing that autonomic vulnerability functions as a systemic substrate capable of modifying disease expression across multiple organ systems.

Conceptual Background

Autonomic Integration Across Organ Systems

The autonomic nervous system operates through distributed neural networks linking the brainstem, vagus nerve, enteric nervous system, cardiovascular reflex arcs, and immune signalling pathways.

Because these systems are tightly interconnected, disruption in one component may propagate physiological instability across multiple domains.

For Example:
• vagal dysfunction can alter gastrointestinal motility
• impaired baroreflex sensitivity can destabilise blood pressure control
• autonomic imbalance may influence inflammatory signalling

These cross-system interactions suggest that autonomic dysregulation may act as a shared pathway linking apparently unrelated clinical conditions.

The Knox Framework

The Knox Framework proposes that autonomic vulnerability develops progressively through cumulative physiological insults, producing systemic regulatory instability.

Stage 1 — Initial Autonomic Insult

A triggering event disrupts autonomic regulation.
Examples May Include:
• viral infection
• inflammatory activation
• acute haemodynamic stress

This event produces partial impairment of autonomic regulatory pathways.

Stage 2 — Autonomic Priming

Following the initial insult, autonomic regulation remains functional but becomes less resilient.

Characteristics May Include:
• increased physiological variability
• exaggerated responses to stress
• reduced autonomic reserve

This stage may remain clinically subtle for extended periods.

Stage 3 — Secondary Physiological Stress

Subsequent stressors further destabilise the autonomic system.
Potential Contributors Include:
• surgical trauma
• prolonged illness
• inflammatory disease
• medication effects

These stressors reinforce the underlying vulnerability.

Stage 4 — Systemic Dysautonomia

Autonomic instability begins to manifest across multiple organ systems.
Possible Manifestations May Include:
• cardiac rhythm variability
• gastrointestinal motility disturbances
• orthostatic intolerance
• fluctuating inflammatory responses

Importantly, structural pathology may remain minimal or absent.

Stage 5 — Functional Disease Expression

At this stage autonomic vulnerability becomes clinically visible through intermittent functional symptoms.
These may include:

- post-viral fatigue syndromes
- gastrointestinal hypersensitivity
- episodic arrhythmia susceptibility
- fluctuating autonomic intolerance

Within the Knox Framework, these conditions represent different expressions of a shared regulatory instability.

Conceptual Figure

Figure 1. The Knox Framework of Progressive Autonomic Vulnerability

Panel A
Sequential physiological insults leading to autonomic priming.

Panel B
Autonomic regulatory instability across cardiovascular and gastrointestinal networks.

Panel C
Amplification of functional disease expression across multiple organ systems.

Clinical Implications

The Knox Framework suggests several important implications.

Autonomic Dysfunction May Precede Overt Disease

Physiological instability may exist before detectable structural pathology.

Functional Disorders May Share A Common Regulatory Substrate

Conditions often considered unrelated may arise from a shared autonomic vulnerability.

Post-Viral Syndromes May Involve Autonomic Priming

Emerging evidence from long-COVID and other post-viral conditions suggests autonomic dysregulation plays a role in persistent symptoms.

Patient-Reported Physiological Instability May Provide Early Clues

Traditional diagnostic frameworks may overlook early autonomic disturbances that are detectable through patient experience.

Research Implications

Future Research Could Investigate:

- autonomic biomarkers of vulnerability
- longitudinal autonomic monitoring
- relationships between viral injury and autonomic stability
- cross-system physiological modelling

Such studies may help clarify whether autonomic vulnerability functions as a disease-modifying substrate across multiple clinical conditions.

Limitations

The Knox Framework is a conceptual hypothesis derived from clinical observation and integrative physiological reasoning.
Empirical Validation Will Require:

- controlled physiological studies
- autonomic monitoring research
- interdisciplinary investigation

The model should therefore be interpreted as a theoretical framework intended to stimulate further research.

Conclusion

The Knox Framework proposes that cumulative physiological insults may create a state of progressive autonomic vulnerability capable of influencing disease expression across multiple organ systems.

Rather than functioning solely as a secondary disturbance, autonomic dysregulation may act as a central regulatory substrate shaping symptom development in cardiac, gastrointestinal, and post-viral syndromes.

Recognising autonomic vulnerability as a systemic phenomenon may help unify disparate clinical observations and encourage new research directions into functional and post-viral disorders.

This Grand Finale is designed as the musical closing of the entire Knox Hypothesis journey—Papers 0 through 6. The tone is anthemic but reflective, like the final chorus of an oratorio where the discoveries, questions, and human experience come together.

The musical script and performance providing a background human understanding to this paper can be found at https://heyzine.com/flip-book/1b24ddaef3.html

The Knox Hypothesis Finale

[Grand choral anthem — full orchestra, Welsh-style choir, slow majestic tempo]

Chorus of Voices

From the quiet question rising
In a body worn and worn again,
Through the years of patient listening
To the language deep within—
Came the search through scattered symptoms,
Through the storms of blood and breath,
Through the shifting tides of balance
Walking close to illness, close to death.
Yet the nerves that guard the body
Hold a map both wide and deep,
Where the heart and gut and immune fire
Through hidden lines their vigil keep.
And when storms disturb that signalling,
When the vagal pathways bend,
Many voices speak as fragments
Of one system seeking mend.

So the Knox Hypothesis gathers
Every thread that we have known,
Not as fragments of disorder
But as networks overthrown.
And the Framework now stands open—
Not a verdict carved in stone,
But a lantern for the science
Still to walk the paths unknown.

Final Refrain

For the body holds a wisdom
In the currents of its sea,
Where the nerves of life and balance
Guard our shared physiology.
And the song of careful questioning
Still will guide what we may see—
Toward the quiet restoration
Of the body's harmony.
[Choir sustains final chord — orchestra resolves softly]

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