

15. Victoria

- (1) I was born in 1948 in Sutton Coldfield. My father was a bank manager for Barclays in Birmingham, and my mother was an article clerk, before she had two children: myself and my brother.

Tell me about your early childhood before you were diagnosed with diabetes.

It was happy. I went to a private school, which again I think was of benefit to me because I wasn't very outgoing, and with small classes I had the benefit of, I suppose, extra help, if you like, and I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

Did you need extra help?

Not really, no, 'cause I ended up mentoring some of the less able children, teaching them to read and write, but that was private education in those days.

What are your memories of being diagnosed with diabetes?

I remember that I hadn't felt well for quite a while, and I began to lose weight - I was quite a plump child, to put it mildly - and I started also to drink excessively. I'd got no energy, I didn't want to get out of bed. And my mother took me to the doctor, and they did a blood test and they couldn't find anything wrong. And then for some reason Dr Jackson, who was situated in Boldmere at that stage, many years ago, had a bit of urine left and she used Clinitest and Acetest on it, and there it was; well over two percent and the Acetone was astronomical, and that was it.

What happened next?

Birmingham Children's Hospital here I come. I was there for a month. I really didn't have any awareness of what was wrong with me. I didn't... okay, I had injections, but somebody else did it, and, you know, I had visits from the vicar and he taught me how to do long division, which is what I remember most about it. And when I came out of hospital, after the month, I still really wasn't aware of the fact that I had a condition that I'd got to live with.

What were you told?

As far as I can recall, the fact that I shouldn't eat sweet things, and that I had to do urine tests. I didn't really ask why because my mother did it. The injections, I didn't really ask why because my mother did it. But then my mother suffered from MS, and one day she was not having a good day and my father appeared in my bedroom holding the glass syringe. And I remember, he said "I don't think I'm going to be able to do this, but your mother says I have to try". And that was the first time I did my own injection, and I carried on from then on, and, I suppose, I'd been diabetic about six months.

I think it may be unusual that in a whole month you weren't taught to do the injections yourself. Are you absolutely sure of that memory? You don't remember being taught how to inject an orange or anyone coming round..

No, actually my mother learnt how to inject an orange; we'd got more oranges in the house than anything else. I do think I recall they asked me if I'd like to inject myself and my answer was a categoric "no thank you", because I was a bit of a... I hoped it would go

(2) away, as you do at that age.

Can you remember any more details of changes in your diet?

Oh yes, I remember that I couldn't eat jam and I couldn't eat puddings, which I'd used to enjoy. And one of the things, I think, that really sticks in my mind is that children particularly - this was to do with diet - can be very cruel. They don't mean it, but I can remember a particular friend who lived next door saying to me "oh, would you like a sweet?", and then she said "oh, I forgot, you're diabetic, you can't have them can you?", and then she proceeded to stuff her mouth with sweets. And I remember that that did hurt a bit.

Can you remember the reactions of your family to you having diabetes?

Yes. They didn't understand. They felt sorry for me and for my parents, but it was ignorance, because there wasn't the knowledge that there is now. People thought diabetic label, ooh... almost as if "was it correlated with a mental problem?", as if, you know, "well, they're diabetic, they can't have sugary things". I always remember my aunt. She was a nurse and had been during the second world war, and she understood a little bit about diabetes. And I remember going round to her house with my parents, and she made me some custard without any sugar in it, and I remember thinking "this is good for me", and oh dear, I did struggle to eat that custard. Because things like sorbitol which you'd got in those days, again, if you looked you could perhaps find them, but as I said, there was no education programme for people who were in contact with diabetics, which I think was a great shame.

Can you go through as much as you can remember of your regime when you came out of hospital: how often you were injected, and urine testing, what insulin you had? Whatever you can remember.

The insulin was a mixture, and there was a blue vial for one and I think the other one was yellow, and there was a mixture and I injected once a day. And also, oh, I had to exercise - it was very important. You had to do between twenty minutes and half an hour in the morning and between twenty minutes and half an hour at night, and you did it after you'd had your breakfast and after you'd had your evening meal. And I can remember going into

(3) the veranda with a skipping rope and thinking "why am I doing this?". And I did it for as long as I could, and I've always had this aversion to skipping ever since, but obviously it was to help with the movement of the carbohydrates and all this sort of thing. With regard to urine testing, it was at least three times a day. And I did have a tendency to have high blood sugar, I suppose, for want of a better word, and I can remember it fizzing

in the glass test-tube and it was usually bright orange, and I remember thinking “oh dear, that means tomorrow morning - more insulin”.

What about diet - how strictly did you keep to that?

Very strictly. Everything was weighed to the letter. My mother bought a pair of very small Salter scales - they still make them now - and it was right down to the last quarter ounce, eighth of an ounce. Everything was weighed and measured; milk, everything, it was all done. And my mother then started to try to make me puddings, and she'd weigh out the ingredients and get it exactly right. And honestly, her patience was incredible, but she did give it hundred percent, hundred and ten percent her best shot.

Was she doing any paid work at the time?

I was at school until I was eighteen but, let me see, when I was seventeen I started to work in British Home Stores in Birmingham as a holiday job, and also - I did that for a couple of years - and then I found, because I wanted to be a teacher, I got myself a job at a local school helping out. And in those days the..

(4) Sorry to interrupt, I meant did your mother do any paid work at the time?

My mother had been an article clerk at a firm of solicitors in the city, had given up work when she got married, which was, I think, the norm in those days. Then she had my brother, then she had me, so no, she was a full-time housewife.

So she had time to do all this weighing and measuring?

Yes, but my father also took part. And I must admit, I did quite enjoy the weighing and measuring bit, because, to me, I liked cooking. But I was in the mood where, I cooked for other people quite happily using high sugar content, and I'd sort of, my brain had re-educated itself, so that if I was doing jam tarts or butterfly cakes or something like that, I would look at them and think “those look nice”, but I wasn't tempted to eat them. I was very fortunate in that sense.

How did you cope when you returned to school after being in hospital for a month?

I didn't really have time, because within three weeks, they'd put me in as an underage candidate for the Eleven Plus, which I thought was a bit unfair. But I can remember going to - I can't remember where I went to sit the paper, and this poor young teacher, a man, had to walk round with me during the breaks. And all the other children were playing, and I didn't know any of them because I was younger than they were, and I remember him walking round with me. And I said to him, you know, “excuse me, but why are you walking round with me?”, and he said “well, I don't really know, but they think you might be ill”, and I remember thinking “well, I don't think I will be ill, I'm okay”. And I do remember feeling desperately sorry for this young teacher, who'd had to give up a Saturday morning to walk round with me because I was diabetic. Needless to say I failed it, because I hadn't done fractions because I'd been in hospital when they'd done them, but then they put me in the following year and I was

all right, so. I didn't really have time to notice the fact that I'd been diagnosed diabetic - it was a case of back on the treadmill, and that was good for me.

So what was life like at school?

At school it was fine, till the end of primary school. Then I'd hit the problem where I'd got through the selection exam - how, I don't know - and I wanted to go to a girls' grammar school, and they said that as a diabetic - and they were quite emphatic about it - I wasn't a suitable candidate. And my mother and father weren't very happy about that, and the LEA wouldn't move and they sent me for an interview at an alternative co-ed grammar school. And I can remember going, and they asked me to read things and all this sort of thing, which I did, and they said "yes, we'd be pleased to offer you a place". And I remember coming out and thinking "well, this isn't really what I want, I think I'd be better off" - and my parents agreed - "at a single sex school". So my mother rang the LEA and they sent a gentleman round, and he came, and I remember him sitting in the front room. And he asked me a lot of questions, very nice bloke, and on his way out, he said something about "I see no reason why she shouldn't go to her choice of grammar school". And I think I was quite pleased and so were my parents. And then the next thing we got was a telephone call from the head teacher of that girls' grammar school, and she said how sorry she was that we'd had to go through this. If she had appreciated that there was a girl that wanted to go to her school and was a diabetic, she would have moved heaven and earth, because her sister was a diabetic, and she could not understand the prejudiced approach.

(5) How did you manage your diabetes at secondary school?

I was very fortunate. I ate when you were supposed to, which was your breakfast, your snack, your dinner, and then you went home. The only thing I remember was that school dinners - I couldn't eat the puddings, and I remember sitting at these round tables, and you had a table leader, and I became one at one stage - they must have been short of people - and having to sit while the other girls were eating their pudding. Nobody ever said anything, but I do remember wishing that perhaps I didn't have to sit there while they ate their pudding, but that was all. Other than that, I experienced no prejudice of any shape or form.

How did you manage your injections?

I had an injection - I was still on one a day - before I came to school in the morning, no problem.

And no urine testing needed during school days?

No, I didn't do any at all.

What about exercise?

Ah, I was a bit naughty with that actually, because I didn't particularly like the idea of going swimming, because, apart from anything else, it was after school and I would rather get my homework done. And what I did do, I used

the diabetes as an excuse for not going swimming, because of the time of day it was when I'd got to be at home; or perhaps I didn't use it as an excuse, but anyway, I didn't go swimming. But I did PE; broke my collar bone, as you do. Everything else, just as normal.

Were there any other diabetics in the school?

No, none at all, no. I was the only one.

Can you remember the reactions of your fellow pupils?

To be perfectly honest, I was not very upfront about it, and that had started, I think, perhaps from when it was a case of "oh, I forgot you're diabetic, you can't have sweets can you?". It had gone through where the authority said, "as a diabetic" - labelled - "you're not a suitable candidate". And I remember thinking "there must be something here I should be ashamed of", so really, I didn't share it. I just... I suppose my very close friends knew, but I just didn't bother to talk about it.

And what about the teachers' attitudes?

Oh, if I hadn't done my homework, no, they treated me exactly the same as every other pupil in the institution, no different.

What were your teenage years like?

A little bit difficult, because you wanted to be out, you wanted to socialise, this that and the other, and diabetes was a little bit of a problem. Because, in those days, you hadn't got the injector pens, you hadn't got the small plastic syringes you could take with you when you went out, you didn't really want to take a Clinitest set with you because, well, you know. I think the thing that marked me there - I was sixteen and I had a boyfriend, as you do, and I remember being very upfront. He wrote poetry, so did I, and I thought that I should tell him that I was diabetic, and I did, and I didn't see him for dust. And he did ring me up, he did give me the courtesy of ringing me up, and said that he'd talked to his parents about it. He didn't understand it, they didn't understand it, and they thought it was better if he didn't see me any more, and I must admit, that did hurt. But thank goodness we've moved on from there.

(6) Can you remember any other examples of ignorance?

Round about 1959, I can remember there was a toyshop in Boldmere, and they always had teddy bears in there and I liked teddy bears and, you know. But my mother took me in there and introduced me to a girl behind the counter, and she said to me "this girl, she's a diabetic" and "you like working in this toy shop don't you?", and the girl said "oh yes", you know, whatever, whatever. And as we were coming out, Mum said "well, the doctors think that perhaps a job like that would be good for you, because it's stress free, and it would mean that, you know, your control would perhaps be all right if you did a job like that". And I remember thinking "well, yes, I'm sure it's very nice, but it's not really what I

want to do. I want to be a teacher, and unless there's a very good reason why I can't, I'd prefer to teach rather than work in a toyshop".

How much did your parents know about diabetes by this time?

A fair amount. They read a great deal, they talked to people. Obviously there wasn't the internet and all that sort of thing, regrettably, but they did... I remember my mother asking at regular intervals when they would find a cure for diabetes, because when I was first diagnosed it was within a fingertip's reach, as it still is. And I got into the stage where I believed it, but then after a few years I decided that, you know, maybe not, but hopefully nowadays they are within reach, and I do hope so.

Did you and your parents reflect on why you'd got diabetes?

Yes, we'd been asked the question, and at that time - and I don't know whether things have changed - it was thought it was inherited. And the only way we could trace it back was on my father's side, my great grandmother, and, of course, she died of it because there was no insulin in those days, and it had missed a generation, female-wise, and then landed with me. Whether or not that was the case. It's also, there was a suggestion it was brought on by trauma, and I don't know whether you've got a possibility of developing it and something can accelerate it, but I can remember running across Chester Road. I'd got off the bus from school, I was with my brother, and I ran across the road. And I can remember this now, I must have been about seven or eight, and I saw my mother on the other side of the road, and I just ran across the road to get to

- (7) my mother. And this huge lorry - and I can remember it now - and it nearly hit me, and I remember the lorry driver swearing at me, and I thought how rude, but my mother screamed at me and this, this and this. And they did wonder, at the children's hospital, whether that could of started off something that was already there. I don't know.

Well back now to age sixteen and your boyfriend dropping you. How did your teens proceed from there?

I decided, after that, that I would concentrate on working academically. I'd already got my O Levels, I did my A Levels and I did all right. The children's hospital were brilliant there, because they decided - there was myself and another girl - that they didn't expect, in those days, diabetics to necessarily have a profession, and there were the two of us that wanted to be teachers. Well, the one girl dropped out and there was only me, so they kept me at the children's. I was supposed to leave at fourteen; they kept me until I was nearly eighteen, seventeen actually, because they wanted to make sure that I'd got the qualifications and I was moving on to get the qualifications to be a teacher. And as soon as they found out that I was going to achieve what I'd hoped, they regretfully said goodbye to me, but I think they were over the moon about it. Whether they wrote it up or not, I don't know, but I can remember being on the steps of the children's hospital and walking down them for the last time, and I was crying.

Seventeen and I was crying, how sad!

It sounds as though you'd felt almost part of a family there?

Oh, definitely. As I said, they had the belief that if you wanted something enough, whether you were diabetic or not, you tried to knock down the barriers and get what you wanted, and that to me meant a great deal. It gave me the confidence, the self esteem, to try to achieve what I wanted to achieve. I remember one consultant saying to me something about - he was very upset because one of his younger teenage patients wanted to go abseiling when he was older, and he was told he couldn't - and this specialist was saying "I see no reason why, just because he's diabetic, he can't go abseiling", and he was really on a line about it. And I remember thinking "yes", this is the step forward, and from the children's hospital then, they were taking those steps.

So was this a particular consultant, or all of the staff, nurses and everyone?

Everybody was so supportive. And I remember one - and I hope you won't mind this - her name was Dr Helen Lloyd, and she had red hair and I remember her. And she was the first female consultant I'd had, and she quoted something on the lines of "the world's your oyster. You may be diabetic, but go for it".

- (8) You suggested that teens were difficult because that was a time when you wanted to be sort of free and out and about.

Yes, as everybody does. I can also remember, sort of 1958 onwards, for perhaps eight, ten years, the syringe boiling on a Saturday evening. You had the glass container with the stainless steel top, you had your glass syringe, you had your hypodermic needles, you wrapped the syringe in lint or gauze or whatever, you put it in the boiling water, and it boils steadily for an hour. And I can remember my mother bought an enamel saucepan, and I've still got that enamel saucepan now, and it's got the marks of where the boiling was done. But Saturday nights was syringe boiling night. And, of course, there was surgical spirit as well. Ah, the smell of it was absolutely awful. I mean, I'm sure it was very good, and, of course, you had to soak - when everything was boiled and clean - you still had to soak this syringe in surgical spirit, and the smell always brings back very strong memories.

And Saturday nights might well be expected to be rather different for a teenager.

Well yes, except that I must admit, again, my mother and father, if I wanted to go out - and obviously I didn't go out for long periods of time - but if I wanted to go out with a group, then I could leave the syringe boiling, and when I came back it was done and I was all set up.

So how did your teens proceed?

Oh, like most people's teens, I think. I got my O Levels, and then I decided, after the boyfriend business, that I would concentrate, so, as I said, the A Levels were fine. Then there was the problem with wanting to go to college, and I thought "oh, we'll go down the, you know, the university won't want me", whatever. No

problem at all, there was nothing. Right, “you’ve got the qualifications”, “you want to be a teacher”, “which course do you prefer?”, “why do you want to do that course?”. No problem. So things had moved on.

- (9) Round about 1965, for a couple or three years, I did develop a form of eating disorder, which in those days they didn’t call anorexia, but I think it was. I started to eat cracker biscuits because it was carbohydrate, so, you know, I knew how much carbohydrate I was entitled to, so I just ate cracker biscuits. My weight dropped quite dramatically by about three stone; I was something like six stone twelve pound, something like that, which wasn’t quite right. But, I think in those days, I think it was hoped that it would go away, and it did. Round about 1968 I started to put on weight. I didn’t get tearful, I didn’t refuse to go out when I put on weight, and, you know, I was okay. I did find that when my weight dropped that I needed less insulin - that was a plus, which of course may have been a contributory factor to why I carried on trying to loose the weight; I honestly can’t identify that.

Obviously teenage girls who haven’t got diabetes do develop anorexia. Would you connect your eating disorder with your diabetes?

Possibly not. I, perhaps, was fortunate, in that I got the benefit that I needed less insulin. But teenage girls and boys, regrettably, do suffer, and I think it’s more - I can’t say - an emotional thing. I think that my self esteem was rock bottom socially, because of what had happened with the, you know, “I’ve spoken to my parents about it and I don’t think it’s right that I should see you again”, and I really do think that, although I wasn’t aware of it, it started me on a bit of a downward spiral. But I made up for it my concentrating on the academic, so.

Do you think it had anything to do with control and controlling your diet and controlling your life?

Yes, it could well have done, because a few years later I got it into my head that I wasn’t diabetic any more, oh dear, and although I was very careful to inject my insulin and do my urine tests, I started to eat as and when I liked. Obviously I put on weight, but, you know, people just described me as blooming, which was a polite word of saying “you’re looking gross”. Again, that lasted probably six months, and then, of course, I ended up in the General in a rather bad way, and I was in there for about ten days. And I suddenly thought what a fool I’d been, trying to prove something wasn’t true when, of course, physically it was. But I do think, from what I’ve read, that sometimes denial can be a part of a lot of conditions, and, you know.

Can you remember how old you were when you ended up in the hospital?

I was, let’s see,

- (10) that was in 1973, when I was about twenty five. As I said, it was just part of it. A very foolish thing to do, in retrospect, but at the time I just wanted to be in control of my own condition.



How did you manage your diabetes while you were at college?

I think I wasn't exactly weighing food, but my eyes, or I mean your brain, had started to be able to measure by sight what was appropriate and what wasn't. Most students live on toast and whatever, which I did; I joined in with everybody else. I lived out, through choice. I did have a couple of hypos, but the medical staff that were there were absolutely ace, and they used to call me up every week to check that I was all right, and I used to say "yes". "Oh good, but we're supposed to call you up once a week just to check you're all right", and that was it. Again, it was a family thing. I would just go up and have a chat about everything under the sun apart from the diabetes. They were very, very good. And as I said, I was fortunate in that nobody treated me any differently, I had a degree of independence, which I hadn't had before, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

And how did you manage the urine testing and injecting when you were sharing a flat with others?

I wasn't sharing a flat, I was in a residential block, and I had the penthouse room - wow, that was a real joy. And I was there for all of my college course. And, as I said, it was just brilliant, because I could do my testing, I could do my injecting in the room as and when necessary, so no problems at all.

Okay then, what happened after you left college?

I wanted, obviously, a job, and I had, during the holidays while I was at college, I had been going back to the school where I'd been before, and they'd been paying me during the holidays to help out, which was great. And then, lo and behold, when I applied for jobs, I had two offers from two authorities. I chose the authority that I'd been working in the school at, and, of course, needless to say, they found me a vacancy. As I left college in the June, they found me a vacancy in the September, and I went straight to that school as a teacher.

- (11) Round about 1970, which was when this was, my father, being of a financial nature, in the nicest possible way, thought it might be a good idea if I had a life insurance policy, and being in the bank, you know, he did some 'phoning round etc. Not one insurance company would touch me. As soon as my father said I was diabetic, it was a case of "no". So my father must have spent three months ringing round people, and in the end he came up with two brothers who were both diabetic, who have now - I mean, I actually got the few thousand pounds from it, it was something like £2.40 a month in the last part. You know, the life insurance policy was fine - and these two brothers sold their company, when they retired, to UK Provident, so, you know, they did all right. And fortunately, understanding the condition, they gave me the life insurance policy, for which I was very grateful, and still am.

And what year would that have been that you left college?

1970, I left in 1970, so that was, you know, and that's when I started work.

What age children were you teaching?

Oh, I would suggest what is now round about year four, which is round about eight to nine.

And how did your diabetes fit in with that?

It was absolutely fine, because, of course, the school day with breaks etc, etc is almost perfect for a diabetic, because if you're feeling a little off colour or you're not sure about anything, you've got those few minutes to go and find out. It's perfect.

What were the reactions of your colleagues to your having diabetes?

Well, obviously it was on my CV, so that, you know, when I was taken on they knew. The Head knew, the secretary knew, the people I was particularly friendly with knew, and they didn't take a scrap of notice. I got no special treatment. I was expected to work as hard as everybody else, and I did.

So, you've been in teaching for over thirty years. How have attitudes in schools to diabetes changed during those years?

I think perhaps the one good thing is that I can remember - ooh, we're probably talking fifteen, sixteen years ago - I had a diabetic boy in my class, and he just happened to end up with me because of the age range. And I remember saying to him, when he was saying "oh", you know, "I'm feeling a bit faint", I remember saying to him "are you sure you feel faint or are you putting it on?", and he looked at me. I said "I'm diabetic as well", he said "oh, I'm all right" and went on with his maths. Again, we had another girl who came to the school, and the Head teacher at the time didn't want her because she was diabetic, and I remember being absolutely incensed, and it was in the papers. And again, this girl came into school and I sort of, I didn't bond, but I kept an eye on her, and I didn't actually tell her why at the time, only told her afterwards. And, as I said, I think nowadays, when I'm with the children, sometimes I'll start to sweat, and the children will say "oh, Miss is sweating, open all the windows", you see, so they open all the windows. "Sugar drink", and there's one that's in charge, and they change it on a regular basis, "oh, it's me for the sugar drink", and off they go down to the staff room, they ask for some sugar in hot water, they bring it back, give it to me, then they go off and do whatever it is their activity was. And then, after about five minutes - there's a clock on the wall - they'll come up and say "are you all right now Miss?", I say "yes, thank you very much", "blood sugar a bit low was it?", 'cause I've got years five and six now, you see. So, of course, to them, they've got uncles, they've got parents, they've got brothers and sisters that are diabetic. It's just something that you take on board, nothing to worry about, which is brilliant.

- (12) I wouldn't exactly call it education, but I remember we were talking about healthy diets - it was a couple of years ago, it could have been last year - and I remember talking about carbohydrates etc, etc. And then one of the boys said "my uncle's a diabetic, and he has to have so many

carbohydrates” and all this sort of thing. I said “yes”, I said “and how is his diabetes treated?”, and this boy said “oh, he has to have injections Miss, it’s terrible”. I said “is it?”, he said “ooh yes”, so I just said to them, I said “just sit there”, and I produced my insulin pen - first time I’ve ever got hundred percent attention, no, that isn’t quite true, but - they just looked, and they could not... so, of course, I took the top off, took the purple top off the needle, showed them, and I said “right, is this the sort of thing that you’ve seen people use?”, and they’ve said “yes, we thought it was drugs”. “These are insulin pens”, I said “if you see somebody using something like that with a vial in it”, I said “those people are diabetic and they’re keeping their blood sugar level, they’re looking after themselves”, “oh”. And then they all had a look at the pen and this, that and the other. And I think they kept their parents entertained for the whole evening with the fact that Miss was a diabetic, and that they’d seen the syringes and they knew about the blood tests, and all this sort of thing. And I think, in a way, it made them feel that perhaps teachers aren’t quite as bad as they’ve had a bad press for.

- (13) Just for the historic record, can you remember what year it was that the Head teacher didn’t want to admit a girl who was diabetic?

It was approximately 1994, and the father was very upset, because obviously he’d had the trauma of his daughter being identified as a diabetic etc, etc. He then tried to get her into the local school, and the Head teacher’s quote was that we could not provide the necessary care for this girl. And I remember thinking “hang on, I don’t think this is quite right”, you know “I’ve been in the school since year one” - I mean, it is a different school, which, whatever, I was only four years at the previous school, but. And then, the authority, the advisors came in and started talking to her, and she was very, how can I put it, self aware, so that what she wanted was what should happen, but she was on a loser with that. So then she changed tack, and told this parent that I was diabetic and that I would keep an eye on her, so I did a terrible thing. I spoke to the advisor and complained that - you see, she’d already tried to have me sacked once because I was diabetic, which had got quite ugly at one stage. I’d had a hypo and admittedly they’d had to get an ambulance, but she’d screamed and shouted and stamped her foot and said I’d got to go, so, of course, I got the union in - they were brilliant, and - I’d only just remembered that - and I wrote letters to people. And in the end, I had a letter of apology from her to say that she hadn’t understood, and she regretted any, you know, how any upset it had caused me. It hadn’t upset me, it had made me extremely angry for the first time in my life. But anyway, going back to this girl. She then told the father that I would keep an eye on her, and I thought “hang on, I’m the very person that, say, four years before you were trying to get rid of because I was diabetic, now I’m being used as an ambassador”, you know, “I’m sorry, swings and roundabouts - you can’t play both sides of the coin”. So I, in my nice way, I complained about that as well, and she apologised in writing.

(14) Can you talk about changes in your insulin regime as well as you remember?

Yes, obviously, as I'd already referred to, I'd got the mixture of insulins once a day. And then round about 1990, it was decided, because I'm what's called a brittle diabetic and my control is not as good as it could be all the time, I was put onto two injections a day. I remember being traumatised by this, because I don't like changes in routine. But this was where I was put onto Actrapid as short-acting and Monotard long-acting and two injections a day. And that, I think, was roughly the time when they started to use plastic syringes, which were a godsend, because the idea was that you injected, threw it away, making sure that it was wrapped appropriately, and it decreased the risk of infection. And it also meant that wherever you were, you could inject far more easily, so again, that was a plus. I carried on with the two injections a day up until, I suppose, about... And then about three years ago, I went onto four injections a day, which I was horrified by the concept to start with, but I must say, it was the best thing I had ever done. Humalog was, or is, the short-acting. Glargine is the long-acting, and we were waiting for the Glargine to come across from America for a few years, which was, you know, we were all hyped up ready and then it finally arrived. And I use the injector pens four times a day. And I must admit, it does give me far more freedom, because if I want to go out, for example, and have a Chinese, I can be sitting there and thinking "well, I'd rather like a bit more rice" and think "well, that's okay, you can just have a Humalog injection, and you won't suffer as a result". So the freedom there is of benefit.

Can you remember how your attitude to your diet, and the contents of your diet, and the measuring of your diet have changed over the years?

Oh, very much so. I'm afraid that I - no, I'm not afraid - I feel confident enough, because I know enough about basic foods, to be able to look at something and say "yes, that would have so many grams of carbohydrate". And then I'll look at something else and say "I fancy that, but I don't really think I should", and then I think "oh well, I will". And, as I said, I can just readdress the sugar balance using the tools of the injections, which is fantastic.

(15) So when did your diet begin to be a bit more flexible?

As I became more familiar with the dietary requirements and the contents of various food. As I said, my confidence increased, and I didn't... from college onwards, as I said, I felt that I could take control, and that as long as I was careful, didn't do anything silly, it would be all right. I did tell my consultant, at the time, how I was behaving towards my diet, and he said that was absolutely fine, because he thought I'd got enough about me to know what to avoid that was a definite no-no, and to be moderate in my approach to other foods.

Can you remember the changes in finding out your sugar levels?

I would say, roughly, 1990s onwards. I can remember that the BM Test Glycaemic strips came out - absolutely brilliant, but the NHS didn't have appropriate funding to provide them for the number of diabetic patients they had. So I

was extremely fortunate - I was able to access, through the General Hospital, I bought them. And the suggestion was, because they were quite expensive, that you cut each strip in half, and it still gave an appropriate reading. And I must admit again, when you were out and about, when you'd got the blood test strips, again - extra freedom. And then very recently the BM Test Glycaemies have been discontinued, and I contacted the firm and got an Accucheck compact set, which is fantastic - I should have had one years ago. It gives exact readings to the first decimal point, and there is a cartridge that fits in the machine. The machine is small, it's in its own case, pop it in your handbag, and you're there. The only disadvantage is it beeps, but then again you can always look round wherever you're sitting and pretend it's somebody else. But this again, the actual ability to see exactly what the position is, is far better than the BM Test Glycaemie was. I've only been using this for about four months, and because it's quite new, when I went to see my GP and I asked for a prescription for the cartridges, she looked through on the computer at what could be provided, and they hadn't actually got those included at that stage. But now I am able to get repeat prescriptions for those. And, as I said, again, the improvement of freedom and confidence, which is what it's all about. I know where I am, what the level is, whether I need to do anything about it, or whether I can rock on.

You said that you were quite brittle. What sort of warnings have you had of hypos over the years?

When I was on Actrapid in particular, I'm afraid that because I'm brittle and I swing up and down, through no fault of my own I hasten to add, I would be standing up one minute and bang unconscious the next. Now that was scary, and the point was there wasn't an alternative insulin that suited my needs at that stage. This sounds stupid, and it isn't quite right, but it got to the stage where I could wave to most of the ambulance crews in Sutton Coldfield, and they'd think "oh, it's her again, but she's actually walking today". And, I'm sorry, you know. Oh, I was so embarrassed, and it was awful.

How old were you at this time?

Ooh, we're talking up to perhaps three years ago. But I was always determined that, okay, they came in, and, of course, you can now have the actual sets that you can inject with,

- (16) and of course that... I sort of had this attitude that, if I was unwell and I recovered in school, I had to carry on. Although I felt dreadful, I had to keep going, and some days I don't know how I did it, but I did. And then I was fortunate, in that the Glucogen vials, which are generally used in the ambulances by the paramedics anyway, were made available to me. And I have one of those in the fridge, but fortunately, touchwood, I haven't needed it. But if, for example, in the night I decided to have a very, very low blood sugar and I couldn't be raised with a sugar drink, then an injection of that - within twenty minutes and I'm up, no problem.

What sort of warnings to you get of hypos now?

Now, I start to perspire, which is why the children open all the windows, but I do now, I am able... I don't get very many now, and I don't... relatively speaking I get very few, but I get adequate warning. I have not been taken over in the way that I was when I was on Actrapid. I get the warning, which is the sweating, which can be numbness round the lips, but it is the perspiration, and you can become soaked in a very short period of time. But as long as you move once you start the perspiring - no problem.

What are your memories of your treatment by members of the medical profession over the years?

I've been extremely fortunate. I've always had a positive attitude towards diabetes. I can remember, right from day one when I was first in the Children's Hospital, the staff nurses we called nurse negatives. And they would respond to that in the diabetic parts. "Nurse negative", and all the staff nurses just smiled as if to say "great, this is where the association is coming between the urine test result, which is ideal, and the actual treatment centre". As I said, I've been extremely fortunate. I was at the children's hospital, as I said, until I was seventeen, and all I had there was encouragement to achieve what I wanted to achieve, in spite of the diabetes. The diabetes was unfortunate, but it wasn't a reason to give up on what you wanted. I then transferred to the General. I went there once, one afternoon, for a clinic appointment, but it meant that I had to lose time from studying. And again, my parents suggested that perhaps it might be a good idea, because I didn't want to miss out on study time - because I needed it, to perhaps see somebody, okay, privately on a Saturday morning, which meant that I would be available either for work or whatever I was doing without a break. And I've been seeing a consultant privately ever since 1976, so from that point of view I've been very lucky. The two doctors that I've had most to deal with was a Dr Fitzgerald, who left me and retired to breed shire horses, which I was very upset about - he was fantastic, and Dr Wright, who I'm with at the moment, who is threatening to retire and leave me. I shall be very, very upset if he does that. But as I said, I've been very lucky. I've also had one hundred percent GP support, and any problems I've had, I've gone and asked, and I've always been shown or helped to make the right decision to make myself better and a hundred percent healthy as far as is possible.

Have you noticed any changes in attitudes between medical staff and patients?

I think so, yes, because I think in the early stages, diabetic patients were tended to be treated as a little bit 'special'. Nowadays,

- (17) we're basically run of the mill, thank goodness, and our condition is talked about, it's recognised, but it's not a major problem. The only major problems are, of course, are the other conditions that can develop as a result, and we shouldn't underestimate those side effects that can happen. But the diabetes itself, with management by the patient, is perfectly liveable with.

What have been the main problems that you've experienced?

Unfortunately, it was discovered that I was allergic to pig and beef insulin, which, you know, there was nothing I could do about it. And as a result, because I used my legs as an injection site and my arms, my legs became very, very swollen at the fronts; we were talking about between five and seven pounds extra weight of fat. And in 1980, I was taken to the General - well, I agreed to go to the General - and they did a wonderful job and took out the excess fat that was the build up from the insulin. I was very fortunate. That was Dr Fitzgerald that got me on that, and, as I said, the operation itself was painless. There were stitches in both legs, but, as I said, I was lucky because when... I did agree to have photographs taken before the operation, which I found a bit uncomfortable, and then after to show the improvement. Obviously they're swelling up again now, but, as you get older, everything goes pear-shaped, doesn't it? And then the other side effect I've had, I've had two cataract operations between 2001 and 2002. I was operated on at the City Hospital, because the doctor there, Dr Lipp, is a diabetic specialist with eyes. And again, I've been extremely fortunate - no sign of retinopathy or anything like that at this present moment. And I'm just extremely grateful and extremely happy that I've been able to live with diabetes with a minimum of upset, and I hope it's going to be the same for everybody else that suffers from diabetes.

Have you had any problems with your feet?

Not yet, no, thank you. No, nothing at all. Recently I dropped a cupboard on my foot and it bled a lot, and I thought "oh dear". You keep a little bit of an eye on it, but no, I've been extremely fortunate there as well, nothing.

How frequent is your contact with the medical profession?

You mean with my General Practitioner or with my diabetic? General Practitioner I pop in to see if I need a repeat prescription, or I've got a chest infection or something like that, which is altering my diabetic control, and I need antibiotics or whatever. My diabetic consultant, Dr Wright, I see him at regular intervals; sometimes six months, sometimes three months. But I have got to say that I did hit a problem, or when I do hit problems, he is always there. Even if he's been at his hospital during the day, I can ring him up, and he will say "right, get yourself over here at such and such a time, or whatever time to suit you", and he will monitor me and make sure that I am okay. And until he's sure I'm okay, he gives me all the support that I need.

(18) Do you think your life might have been different in any respects if you hadn't had diabetes?

Yes, I think it possibly would have been different. The career - the teaching, no. That was what I wanted to do from when I was teaching my teddy bears when I was four onwards; that wouldn't have been a change. I would perhaps have liked to have children, but at the stage when it might have been feasible when I was married, it was thought that it perhaps wasn't a good idea, from the point of view of, not so much the mother's health, but whether or not the child might pick up the disease through inherited genes or whatever. And then,

within perhaps ten years, it was a case of “well, why haven’t you had children? It would have been a good idea if you had”. You can’t win, it’s swings and roundabouts. Perhaps I would have had children, yes. I would have perhaps not had swollen legs, which would have been nice, which would have avoided an operation. And I would also, I think, have enjoyed not having to blood test, and being able, when I was younger, to go out and about doing what I wanted to do, when I wanted to do it, without having to worry about blood testing, and whether I was perspiring because I was, you know, too low or whatever. But you get used to it, and there are far worse things in life than this.

Can you date those attitudes to having children? Whenabouts would it have been regarded as perhaps not a good idea?

Round about when I was married in 1976. I think perhaps then would have been an ideal time, but there was the concern that it could affect me, as I said, and that the child could have been affected by the diabetes or whatever, so that was late seventies. Moving into the eighties, the attitude had changed. “Well, why haven’t you had a child?”, and I kept thinking “well, because it wasn’t thought to be a good idea from the point of view of the mother and the child”. But, as I said, perhaps nowadays everything is monitored carefully and no problems.

(19) Have there been any positive aspects to having diabetes?

I can think of one, and that is, and I suppose it affects the wider world too, you have to take responsibility for yourself. You can’t rely on other people to get you through life, if you like. It’s a bit of an extreme example, but as I said, you are responsible for yourself essentially, and by being responsible for yourself, it enables you to take on responsibilities outside those of your own, and I think that’s what life’s all about.

How have those closest to you coped with your diabetes?

Well, I was married between 1976 and 1990, I was divorced in 1992. My husband was very understanding, he was very good. I think he found it... sometimes he got angry if I had a hypo and things like that, but I think that was frustration because he wasn’t quite sure how to sort things out. I’ve been living with Phil for twelve years and he is absolutely first-rate, excellent. If I have a hypo, if I’m *compos mentis*, he’ll shout “move all the decent ornaments!”, and things like that. Well, of course, I just burst out laughing, which makes me feel better psychologically, then he gives me a sugar drink. Because one of the problems can be with diabetics, that when they are in a hypoglycaemic condition, hypoglycaemia, they can become quite aggressive - I mean, I can become quite aggressive. I don’t know what does it. It’s as if people... like Phil is trying to say to me “look Vicky, you need a sugar drink”, “no I don’t, I’m perfectly all right”. And it isn’t just me, it’s something the brain does and I don’t understand it, but I know it is quite commonplace. But Phil just sort of sits me down and says “oh, for goodness sake”, takes the sugar, or if on the rare occasions where I’ve had the Glucogen, I’m injected. And then when I wake up, he says things like “oh well, you know, I’ve ruined half the towels because you’ve perspired all



over them". He just takes it as being somebody living a normal life who has got a little bit of a disadvantage, but it doesn't stop them cleaning the house, it doesn't stop them cooking, and it doesn't stop them working.

- (20) Can you talk about what your life is like now aged fifty six, and after forty six years of having diabetes?

My life, I would describe as normal. I do, or we do, what we want to do. We do a lot of gardening. We've recently moved house and it's quite big, and there's a lot of work to do in it. I go to work, although a lot of people say that teachers don't work - they just drop in occasionally; it isn't quite the case. Phil works for the lifeboats fundraising, I work for the PDSA fundraising. We see friends, we go to their houses, we go out for meals, and basically, as I said, it's a normal life. I would like, well, as I said, I've been told by Dr Wright that if I do another three, roughly three years, I can have a gold medal from the British Diabetic Association for doing fifty years of controlling my diabetes. I was so amazed by this proposition that I did try to ascertain what value the gold was; whether it was a milk bottle top or was it something a little bit better. Dr Wright said he wasn't prepared to tell me, but he would recommend me for one of these medals. And by the time I'd sort of stopped laughing and picked myself up off the floor, I thought, well, it's a lovely idea, but it should go to younger people who have perhaps done ten years or something like that. For them, it would be an incentive. To me - well, it's very nice, but. One thing I would like to mention, when I am at work - you know, I'm there most of the time - I am coming across more adults in school coming in. We have two nurses that run a first aid course for year five and six, and one of them, Mick, is a diabetic himself and has been for thirty years. He works in a casualty department at one of the local hospitals. And we were talking about injections, and he said to me something about, he said "I'm no recommendation", he said, "because sometimes, if I'm in the pub", he said, "I inject through my denims", you know using his pen, and I said "oh, I think that's absolutely disgusting". I said "if I'm out and I inject", I said, "I'm only injecting through thin, lightweight cotton trousers", at which point we both burst out laughing. The children looked round to think, you know, "I thought this was break time, what are they laughing at?". We didn't bother to enlighten them on that occasion.