

19. June Hill

(1) Tell me about your background.

I was born in 1928. My father worked as a manager of a shoe shop; my mother was a housewife in those days. I was the first child. As we grew up, we moved house a couple of times, but always in the Birmingham area. Both grandparents, on both sides, lived in Birmingham, so we saw quite a bit of them. My mother was one of ten, so we had lots of aunts and uncles and cousins, who I still have, because they're the ones who are still alive, and so we were very family orientated. I went to grammar school, Saltley Grammar School, also in Birmingham. And I was evacuated - I was due to start at grammar school the year war broke out, and so I didn't actually start at Saltley. I was evacuated, first of all with my parents, because they didn't want me to go to Hinckley for whatever reason. But it didn't work out, because there was nowhere for me to go to school in Fenny Compton in Warwickshire. And so I went to Hinckley, and spent the first... well, I suppose it was about nine months, and then when there was no bombing, most of us came back home. But then when the following year the bombing started, I went back to Hinckley again, and I was there for a fair time, before coming back and finishing my education in Birmingham when things quietened down again.

Would you say your family was quite well-to-do?

No, no. My father's salary was just a manager of a small shoe shop, no. I mean, we never went short of anything, but, you know, and we were very happy, yes.

Was there any diabetes in your family?

Well, there obviously was, but I didn't find out about it until I myself, or in fact until my mother was diagnosed. And then when she was talking around the family, she found that two of her uncles had had diabetes many years before. And I've no idea what the sort of treatment or anything was then.

When was your mother diagnosed?

She was diagnosed by chance. She had a slight problem with her heart, and on one occasion the doctor took a blood sample. She was probably in her early fifties, and it was that which gave her the first idea that she had diabetes. And when mother was diagnosed, we were a little bit shocked, because she was the first one. Well no, she wasn't the first one, because my nephew had been diagnosed earlier on, but we hadn't really thought it was a family thing until that had happened.

Were you living at home at the time your mother was diagnosed?

I was living... I was married by this time, so I was living with my husband in Birmingham. But my parents and my young sister and brother had moved to Weston-super-Mare, so that is why my idea's a bit sketchy, because I wasn't actually that close to her at that time, although we visited frequently obviously.

Tell me what you did, then, after you left school.

After I left school? Well, I was seventeen. I'd taken my sort of higher school certificate, as it was called then. I wasn't old enough to go to training college, which my mother wanted me to do, although I myself wanted to be a nurse, but she wasn't having any of that. She'd paid for my education - she wanted me to be a teacher. So, I actually taught in a private school - unqualified - for twelve months. And then I went to Nottinghamshire County Training College and did a two year teaching course, and then came back to Birmingham to teach, and lived at home for a while.

And, then, where did marriage come in?

Well, I had a very good friend whom I'd met when I was evacuated, and we used to holiday together. And after the - I think it was just towards the end of the war possibly, or might have been just after the war, we went down to Cornwall on one of these potato picking holidays. And there we met a couple of chaps, who invited us to call in at Bristol, where they lived, on their way home from this holiday. And that was when I met Tony, and it just went on from there.

What did he do for a living?

Well, at the time, he was doing an apprenticeship at Bristol Aeroplane Company. But his main interest was cars, so when they started to make a car called the Bristol, he transferred to the car making side of things. And from then on, he just

sort of stayed in the car industry for the whole of his working life.

(2) What kind of teaching did you do?

Well, I was trained to teach junior school, but when I first went into a school to start my first job, unfortunately there were no vacancies in the junior department, so I had a very rough time my first year in the infants with the reception class. But when the inspectors came round, they decided it was time I went back up into the junior school, for which I'd been trained. And that's where I stayed until, ooh, many, many years later, when I decided to have a change. And I actually took a job helping, sort of, not disabled, but - what did we call them in those days? I've forgotten! - the sort of slow learners, that's right, the slow learners in a secondary modern school. And I very much enjoyed that, rather better than I had doing the primary school teaching.

How did your diagnosis of diabetes come about?

Well, I had a few sort of problems medically, and I went into the Victoria Hospital in Lichfield for a D&C. And I can remember as the - I'd been given my premed - and the nurse came up in her hat and coat, and she said to me "can you understand what I'm saying, it's important?", and I said "well, yes". And she said "well, when you've had your operation and gone back home, you are to go straight to your GP and say that you have glucose in your water and your blood". She said "have you any diabetes in your family?", and I said "well, yes,

there's my mother and my nephew", and she said "well, I suspect that that's what you have". So, that is how my diagnosis came about.

Just before you lost consciousness?

That's right, it was indeed, yes! And when I woke up, I did wonder - had I dreamed it?

What happened next?

Well, I went to my GP, who was extremely good and very friendly. And I think I must have used the word sugar instead of glucose, because that's the word my mother always used, and he said "what do you mean, sugar in your water?". And I said "well, this is what the nurse said to me, or perhaps she said glucose". And he was a little bit. . . he said "but you're so healthy", and I said "well, yes, I feel healthy". But anyway, he did take the various blood tests. In fact, he sent me up to the hospital in Birmingham to be tested. And I can remember spending the day there, and the nurse saying "take a walk up and down the stairs and then we'll take your blood again", and I was saying "well, what difference does that make?", and she said "you'd be surprised"!

What hospital was this?

It was the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham.

And what happened after the tests?

Well, I went back to the GP, and he obviously had letters from the hospital, and he said that it was more marginal than anything to worry about. And so he gave me two cardboard sheets, and he called them red and green points, and he said I was to have so many of the red points each day - these were foods on these, listed rather like diet sheets - and so many of the green points. Now, I can't remember anything more than that, except for looking through these sheets. But what I do remember is, when I was later very poorly in my life and the nurse was looking after me at home, I told her about this. And she said "have you still got them?", and I said "well, yes I have", and she said "show them to me", and she said "they ought to be in a museum", she said. But I'm afraid I've thrown them away; I haven't got them any more!

(3) So what year was this, that you were diagnosed and given these red and green points?

I think it must have been about 1962; something like that. (Medical notes say 1960) And I don't remember it taking over my life at all. In fact, I have very vague recollections of thinking "well, I'm well", and perhaps this is something I shouldn't have done, but I don't remember sticking rigidly to this particular diet at that time.

Can you remember giving up anything for the sake of diabetes?

I can remember thinking to myself "well, I'm lucky, because I don't like sweet things". So I think this was why I didn't worry too much, because I never had

eaten a lot of sweet stuff, so I just carried on not eating. And perhaps... I did cut down on chocolate and sweets themselves, because I always loved Dairy Milk chocolate. And I remember cutting that down, and sometimes saying to myself "I'm going to have a little treat", and having a little bit. But, it didn't really bother me at all, and I was sort of... When I went back to work, when my son was five years old, I can still remember feeling the same about my diet.

When was your son born?

He was born in 1959; a great joy to us, because we'd been married for seven years and no sign of any children, so that was really a highlight of my life. And he's never caused us any trouble either.

Did you try any special diabetic foods?

I did actually look in the shops for them, and I think I bought a jar of marmalade! But no, I think in those days they weren't that particularly prominent, and so it didn't really occur to me. And I remember asking my mother about it, but she was never terribly serious about her diabetes. She always thought "oh well", you know, "I'm going to live life to the full", which she always did, and I'm afraid diet was the last thing on her mind, always. But I did try to buy her, and once I bought her a box of chocolates, diabetic chocolates, and she said "they were horrible, don't ever buy me anything like that again"!

Was she on tablets at any stage?

She did go onto tablets, yes, after being... in fact, I believe once she was diagnosed she went straight onto tablets, and she gradually increased her dose of tablets from, you know, over the years. And I remember my brother, who, of course, was much closer to her, living in Weston, saying to me "the doctor would like to put her onto insulin, but he doesn't think that it would be possible for her to keep to the regime very easily". And so she stayed on tablets all her life. But she still lived to eighty eight.

When you went to your GP and he was doubtful whether you'd got diabetes because you seemed so well, did you get the impression that he knew much about diabetes in 1962?

I have to say, I don't think he did. But there again, I'd had no knowledge of the medical profession, and I did, in fact, actually think they were wonderful - doctors and anybody to do. So although I never sort of seriously thought "he doesn't know much about it", on reflection, I think perhaps he didn't have a lot of diabetic patients and wasn't too clear about it.

Did he give you any advice about exercise?

None at all. He only ever mentioned cutting down on sugar - those were his words.

And did you take any more exercise after your diagnosis?

Well, I've always been an exercise fan, so it would have been difficult to take any more exercise. I mean, when I was actually training, or before I trained to be a teacher, I took a keep fit instructors exercise, so after I'd, you know, left college, I did evening... taught, in evening classes, keep fit and that sort of thing. And I've always sort of done lots of walking, rambling, and so the exercise, really, I just carried on as I'd always done.

So how did your diabetes progress?

Well, I suppose once I'd been put onto tablets - we

(4) have got to that stage, have we?

Well, how long was it before you were put on tablets?

Well, it seemed a long time. I'm not quite sure actually... I think it was probably about 1983 that I went onto tablets; that's as near as I can remember looking back, and I got my husband to think about it as well. But again, I mean, I just took the tablets. I was, you know, very good, and would never dream of not taking them. But I don't think it changed my outlook on life at all or what I did, because I still had, you know, energy, and, you know, it didn't really affect my life at all. Although I did notice that my mother, as the years went by, she became very conscious of not being able to do the things she'd always done. Her life became much more restricted.

Why?

Well, she put on an enormous amount of weight; I think that was the biggest problem. She actually ran a boarding house in Weston-Super-Mare when she first went down there, and she felt unable to continue doing this, so, with my sister, they opened a little shop, and that sort of kept her interested. But as the years went by, she couldn't even manage that, and she did, in fact, almost become housebound for the last ten years of her life.

Due to what - foot problems or...?

No, I don't think she ever had foot problems. She had heart problems. And when I say... I really mean she was obese - you know, very, very difficult to get about. That was her main problem, and arthritis together with it. But whether any of these were sort of concerned with the diabetes, I just really don't know, because not being close enough to her, you know - a hundred miles away, I didn't have that sort of conversation with her very often.

But did what was happening to her in older age affect your approach to your own diabetes?

It did indeed. It was the first time, I think, as my mother's health deteriorated, I did begin to think "I don't want to end up my life like that", and at that point I began to really go into diabetes. I read up a lot about it, all that I could, and I realised the long term implications, which I hadn't ever thought about before,

because nobody had ever told me about them. I thought “well, this is what I’m going to head for if I’m not really, really careful”.

- (5) So, at least twenty years after you were first diagnosed, you began to read up about diabetes. What did you discover, then, in the 1980s?

Well it was, I think it was just a fear of the fact that there were these complications, which could be so serious. And I began to look around me, and seeing people, sort of, and thinking “well, I wonder if they’ve got diabetes?”. And being quite determined and talking it over with my husband, who at that time, I’m sure, was even less knowledgeable than I was about it, and he had never really taken things seriously. But we did talk about it a lot at that point and decide that I really must... well, I mean, I think I always had lived a fairly healthy lifestyle, but I was much more conscious of it then. And in recent years we’ve joined Diabetes UK, and he’s come along, and said how glad he is, because it made him so much more aware of what diabetes really can do to people.

Did you make any changes to your lifestyle in the 1980s?

Where were you being treated when you began to find out more about diabetes?

It must have been when we moved from Sutton Coldfield to Oxford. And I started a nursing training, and the Authorities suggested I went to the diabetes clinic at the John Radcliffe Hospital. And it was there that I was given a lot more information than I ever had before about diabetes, and this was why I began to feel seriously that I really had to take it into account with my general lifestyle, and everything really.

And when was this move to Oxford?

This was in 1982.

And was it the John Radcliffe or the Radcliffe that you went to?

I did my training at the John Radcliffe. I worked there on the wards for a short while, perhaps a couple of years, and then I took a job at the Churchill with the radiotherapy and oncology unit.

And where was the diabetes clinic that you went to?

Well, from this initial clinic at the John Radcliffe Hospital, they then decided it would be a good idea if I went regularly to the diabetes clinic at the old Radcliffe. There I found it very helpful. I went, I think, about every six months for a check up, and they really were very, very good. They checked over things which had never been checked over before, and I really felt somebody was taking an interest in my health.

What sort of things did they check over?

Well, they always did my blood pressure, my blood glucose, they looked at my feet, they tested my nerve type endings - I’m not quite sure what the medical term is for that - and my eyesight. And I just generally felt that, you know, if

there was anything to look at, they would see to it and suggest some treatment for it.

(6) And none of these things had been tested before in the first twenty years or so of your diabetes?

No, none at all. My GP had given me these diet sheets - the reds and the greens - and after that, apart from perhaps mentioning it if I went to him with any other problem, it never seemed to be brought forward at all. And it wasn't until I was actually in Oxford, and was sent to the first real diabetes clinic, that anybody ever sort of bothered about it at all.

What did you think of the people, the medical staff, at the old Radcliffe?

Oh, I found them very good, yes. I mean, I did sometimes feel, well, I never saw the same doctor twice, but I think you get that in anywhere, don't you? But no, they were all... no, I have to say... I mean, occasionally you felt "oh, he was really good. I really feel I got something out of that", but perhaps not always. And the other thing that I noticed was that they only seemed to be there for a short while. If you got talking to them, they were over on a sort of a sabbatical - is that what the right word? - or something for twelve months, and then they were going back. And I got this impression that a lot of the doctors in the diabetes centre were like that, but I'm not sure that I'm right.

Did it matter to you, not seeing the same person each time?

I would have preferred to see the same person each time, because a) it took a long time for them to look back in my notes and find out what was the matter with me and what treatment I was having, and also I thought it would be better for the continuity.

When you found a doctor particularly good, what was it about them that made you feel you were getting somewhere?

I think it was just that they made me feel that they were doing their best for me somehow, and that I was a person as opposed to just somebody who just turned up at the clinic. I mean, that didn't happen very often, but I suppose it's inevitable - it's life, isn't it?

And what dealings did you have with nurses in the 1980s? You were a nurse yourself, of course.

Do you mean the nurses in the diabetes centre? Well, only that they took my blood pressure and tested my glucose. I don't think... oh yes, that's right, they did. I was always asked if I wanted to go and see somebody about having my eyes tested; that was what. They would send me to have my eyes tested. I don't recollect any other connection with the nurses in the diabetes centre.

How did your nursing colleagues react to your diabetes?

Well, when I was at the John Radcliffe on the wards, I don't think anybody really took a great deal of notice. They knew I had diabetes, but, I mean, I just

carried on as normal and nobody worried about it at all. But once I transferred to the Churchill, to the radiotherapy department, I had a very good - boss I was going to say, she was the senior radiographer in fact. And she, herself, was very, very conscious of all of us and any problems that we had, and she was extremely anxious that I should always go to my clinic appointments and things like that. And very often she would ask me how my diabetes was going, so I felt I was being, you know, really well looked after there. There was also a Dr Laing who worked there, who himself, was on insulin, with diabetes. And we used to have little chats together and talk about it, and I always used to think "well, I'm all right, I'm not on insulin", so I was feeling very happy about that.

(7) Did you have any fear that you might have to change to insulin?

Well, I hadn't up until that point. I suppose I was feeling a little bit complacent about it. But when I changed over from one tablet - was it... I think it was... from one tablet to another, because of the strength anyway, probably in '94 or thereabouts, it was mentioned by the doctor that at some point in the future I might well have to go onto insulin, because of the progress of my diabetes. But I must admit, at that time, although I was a little bit not happy at the idea, it didn't really worry me too much.

So when did you go onto insulin?

Well, it happened very suddenly in 1995. I remember it very clearly. I had been to a keep fit class down at my local church hall. And I didn't have my car on that particular occasion, and the instructress brought me home. And she dropped me off, and I went into the house, and I went into the bathroom to have a shower, and I just caught glance of myself in the mirror. And I just could not believe what I saw, because I was bright yellow all over. And I thought "well, I can't understand this", because this lady had just dropped me off - surely she would have said if she'd seen me; it was really a bright orange colour! But anyway, I sort of had my shower and I was trying to think, and I thought "well, I know there's something wrong". My eyes were dreadful, but I felt fine. However, I rang the GP, and the - I suppose it was the receptionist I spoke to - she said "well, perhaps you'd better come down to the surgery", which I did. And he looked at me, and he took... I think I remember him taking a blood sample and taking a urine sample, and saying you've got - I can't remember now what it was - something that gives you a pain anyway. And I was saying "well, no, I haven't got any pain", and he kept saying "well, you must have pain", and I kept "no, I haven't got any pain". So eventually he said "well, I'll have to get you into hospital and we'll try and sort it out. Will you be all right to go home?", and I said "yes, I'm fine". So, I was on the bus at the time, and I came back home. And he rang me very shortly to say that it was not possible to find me a bed at that particular moment, but he would back in touch with me during the day to see how I was etcetera, and then "how's your pain?", and I kept saying "I haven't got any pain"! And eventually, in the evening, he phoned again, very apologetic - still couldn't find me a bed, but he said "shall I send somebody down to look after you?". And I said "well, no, there's no problem. I've got my husband here,



and I'm feeling fine. I'm still very yellow", but, you know, I hadn't got any pain. "Right", he said, "well, I'll be in touch with you in the morning". Anyway, I suppose I must have slept - I can't remember that night. But he rang at seven o'clock the next morning to say that he had arranged for me to go into the John Radcliffe - had I got transport? So, my husband took me into the hospital, and it just sort of went on from there. I was finally found... well, I went into the... it was the sort of emergency or the GP, I think, emergency department to start with, where they took various tests, and then I was actually put in a bed on the ward. And after, well, I suppose twenty-four hours or so, I was diagnosed with... oh, I've forgotten the name of it now! What do you call it? It begins with a C, I think.

- (8) And so it was decided that I had somehow developed jaundice, and then we started on this process of trying to find out why I had it. I mean, it had come on very suddenly - well, I don't know whether that's usual or not. But I can remember going through all these tests after tests after tests, and the consultant coming in every morning and saying "we still haven't found out any reason for you to have developed jaundice". And they kept on about me having been to Singapore, because my son at that time was working in Singapore. But it was two years since we had been there, and they decided that was far too long for me to have picked up anything there to have developed at this point. And in fact, in the whole of the six weeks that I was in the hospital, they never ever found out what it was, and the ultimate conclusion was that it was some sort of virus. But apart from that, I never really had any knowledge, and I still, to this day, don't know why I had it.

Was there any suggestion that something could have interacted with your diabetes or...?

Never, no, that was never a problem at all. But I was, of course, immediately I went into the hospital, put onto insulin, and that was the very first time that I was on a drip, an insulin drip, and, of course, I've been on it ever since.

What difference did that make to your life?

Well, I think the first thing was that I had to monitor my blood. Now, they did this in hospital, and it was the first time that I had ever realised that one needed to monitor your blood if you were a diabetic. I mean, that just had never occurred to me before. But it was made clear to me that once I left hospital, that I would indeed have to monitor my blood quite regularly, and it would influence, you know, my life to that extent, because I had to sort of... And it was the first time I heard the word exercise mentioned as well. Although I did feel that... well, perhaps I'm jumping the gun a bit here, but when I left the hospital, it was because I was presumably... well, I was booked in for a transplant - is it all right to go on to this? - on the... it was Easter weekend, I can remember it quite clearly. It was Good Friday, and the consultant came round, and he said "I probably won't see you for a couple of days, because I'm going so and so, but on

Tuesday the ambulance will be here to take you up to Birmingham transplant centre". And then I said "please can I go home?", because, I thought, at the age of sixty seven I think I was, and prospect of getting a donor, I'm never ever going to come through this. I said "please can I go home? I mean, I can get onto my feet just about, and I would just love to go home". What I really wanted to do was check that my will and everything was in order. And he said "well, no, you can't, because you're in such a low state". He said "your bilirubin is three hundred", or something like that, when it should have been between seven and eighteen, I think is what he said, and that "you'll catch any infection and you won't be able to get to hospital in time for us to treat it". However, by the end of Good Friday he had changed his mind, for whatever reason, and he said "who would look after you?", and I said "my husband". And he said "well, does he come in every day to see you at the hospital?". I said "he comes in twice a day", so he said "all right, well we'll let you go home, and I'll send some nurses in to look after you all over the weekend". So I came home, and the nurses came in every morning, every evening, to see how I was. And my husband carried me up the stairs into bed, because I hadn't got the strength. But I managed to do what I wanted to do. And then, on the Tuesday morning, he drove me back to the hospital, and the consultant came and he said to me "we don't seem to have any results of your blood while you've been at home". And I said "well, you won't have any because nobody took any blood", and he said "well, we've been taking them every day you're in hospital", and I said "yes, but the nurses didn't take any, although they came in twice a day". "Well, we

- (9) can't send you up to the transplant centre without a blood sample", so he said "well, I'll have to get it done now". So we did this immediately, and they obviously rushed it through urgently. And when he came to see me, he said "we're in a bit of a quandary about what to do with you, because your bilirubin is still on three hundred" - I think those were the words that he said - "it hasn't gone up". And he said "that's the first time in six weeks that your bilirubin hasn't escalated, and we're just wondering whether to take a chance and see if it stays like that, or might even go down". He said "I think before we send you up to Birmingham, we'll keep you here for a few days and see how things go". Well, that sounded fine to me, except that by this time there was somebody in my bed and they didn't have a spare bed. So he said "well, I don't know what your husband was doing with you at home, but it's obviously done you good". He said "I think we'll send you back home and send the nurses in again, but this time we'll get them to take your blood"! And this is what happened. And indeed, over a period of nine months, my bilirubin actually went right down to where it should be, and I gradually recovered. Having felt very, very weak for a long time, you know, I did actually get back into good health again. So that was my miracle - the most wonderful thing that happened to me.

So, obviously, what was most on your mind at this point was not your diabetes, but how did you manage your diabetes during this period of extreme illness?

Well, I was very conscious of having to monitor my blood, but it wasn't really a problem, except in as much as I had so little appetite, and I just felt that it was difficult. But the nurses who came round, they seemed to think that I was fighting the insulin, having been put on it. I didn't quite understand this, but they kept increasing my insulin to such an extent that I kept going hypo, and this was the biggest worry I had over those first few weeks. And in the end, I remember phoning the GP and saying that I wasn't very happy because I was having all these hypos, and he immediately sent me up to the diabetes centre at the - where was it? - at the old Radcliffe at the time. And I saw a consultant there, and she said "well, you're on far too high a dose. You must drop it right down". And she cut it down gradually for me, you know. She phoned me up on a few days running and said "how are you going, so and so?" until it got down to a more manageable level. And that is my main memory of it. But after that, things settled down, and I suppose I just... I mean, I didn't get out and about very much for the first few weeks, so, and I slept a lot, so I think I probably... well, I just sort of recuperated, like you would after anything else, really. But I was very much more conscious of my diabetes, particularly having been put onto insulin and having to monitor my blood regularly - it made me a completely different perspective of life really. And, of course, I was just so glad to be alive anyway that, you know, it was just... I didn't mind what I had to do as long... And gradually getting stronger and stronger all the time just made everything worthwhile anyway.

How did people monitor their blood in 1995?

Well, I had this little blood glucose meter. I think my husband had to go out and buy it for me from the chemists - I was given the name of it - and I just sort of pricked my finger with it, and it was very easy to use fortunately. And I had a book to record the sort of millimoles, or whatever it is, in there, and I just kept a record of it. And then when I went up to the hospital or to the clinic, they would have a look at it and see how, you know, how I was monitoring and how it went from there.

(10) Did you adjust your insulin or did you always keep to the same dosage?

I got the impression I wasn't to adjust it myself, but they did adjust it if they felt it was necessary. I mean, I was regularly going to the clinic at this point; I think it was every... well, it was every week for a while, and then it was every two weeks. And I was also seeing a dietician, which I found quite helpful, because, with my lack of appetite, she was able to suggest like having lots of small little snacks rather than sitting down for a big meal, which I didn't feel much like cooking anyway. And I did find that quite helpful.

Before we get onto your new lifestyle, just to backtrack on those district nurses who came in and put your insulin up and up. Did you tell them that you were having hypos?

Well, I did, yes, but they kept saying - the word was "I was fighting the insulin", and that ultimately the body would settle down and it would be all right. And I

couldn't somehow make them understand that I was just feeling worse and worse all the time, and that I wasn't quite sure how to cope with these hypos, because it was something I'd never had in hospital. But then, I suppose, when you're on a drip, it's a regulated sort of amount of insulin, which is rather different, so. But when you're feeling very weak, it's difficult perhaps to put over your feelings so much, and they probably thought I was very vague anyway, which I probably was. So, you know, I don't want to criticise too much, but I do feel that it would have been better if I had not kept the insulin being pushed up and up like that, yes.

Now, as you were recovering from your illness, you're on an insulin regime. How often were you injecting?

I was injecting, from the start, twice a day. I had Insulatard in the morning and Human Mixtard in the evening before my evening meal. And gradually it settled down, and I've been on the same insulin ever since. I mean, the doses have changed quite considerably, but I just don't remember feeling particularly ill with it at all, you know, as long as I kept a good regime and I kept up the exercise, once I got back. . . Once I got my strength back, I was able to. . . that was the first thing I wanted to do. I really missed having it, but it, in actual fact, didn't do me a lot of good the first time. I can remember pushing the vacuum cleaner round the house and I just sort of did my back in, because, I suppose, for nine months I'd been lying down and I just sort of hadn't ever done anything. So that wasn't a very happy start to my feeling better, but never mind.

Did you notice that increasing exercise affected the dosage of insulin that you needed?

Yes, I did, yes, and I've always felt that. And more recently, it's actually. . . my insulin dose is a lot lower than it was years ago.

(11) Have you developed any health problems?

Well, I have been diagnosed with blood pressure, and I've been on treatment for that for maybe two and a half, three years now. And then earlier this year, I had a very sudden surprise when I actually went to the diabetic clinic. And he was very, very happy with all my results, and just as I was going out of the door he said "and what about your eyesight?". And I said "well, I have, in fact, decided to go to the opticians, because I can't actually see the writing on the television screen, which I've never had a problem with before". And he had a quick look in my eyes, and he said "when were you planning to go?", and I said "well, in a week or so", and he said "well, I should go tomorrow". So I went to the opticians the following morning. I rang up and they said "yes, pop in", and I asked to see somebody who could deal with diabetes patients. And I saw this particular - well, I call him an optician, I think they're probably called something else now - and he said straight away "well, there is a problem", he said, "but I can't really see, because there's such a lot of bleeding at the back of the eye". He said "if I make you an appointment for the eye hospital tomorrow, can you get there for nine o'clock?", so I said "well, yes". And that was how I

was sort of diagnosed with a sort of form of macular degeneration, which had apparently occurred very, very quickly. I can only... well, to me, over a period of two months earlier this year, which had almost completely taken the sight out of my one eye, and I was warned that it might well transfer to the other eye in time. I asked if there was any treatment, and they said “well, no”, and I said “well, is it due to the diabetes?”, and they said “no, absolutely not”. In fact, I went to the hospital several times, because they were so concerned as to what was the cause of it, and that it might possibly be the diabetes. But after several visits and having various tests, including the one where... oh, I can’t remember the name of that now, but it sends you all yellow anyway, and I had horrible feelings of my jaundice all those years ago. Fluorescein - that was it. A fluorescein injection I had, which apparently enables them to see the back of the eyes much more clearly, and from that they decided that no, it was nothing to do with diabetes, but it was this macular, and all I could do was take extra vitamins. And they put me on something called ICaps, and told me to watch my diet very carefully, have lots of bright green and orange vegetables, and so that’s what I’m doing. And so far, there’s been no more further deterioration in my good – so what I call my good eye, although I do find it quite difficult to see things at certain levels, but I can manage quite well at the moment fortunately.

(12) And how has your diabetes been in the past year?

Well, it’s been quite manageable and I’ve felt reasonably fit. My only real problem has been arthritis in one hip and two knees, which I’ve found quite difficult to get about with at times, particularly going up and down stairs. And I was listening to the radio one day, and I heard this lady talking about something she referred to as magnetic water, and that she had found that this had completely cured her arthritis, which had put her into a wheelchair fairly early on in life. And she went on at great length about this, and how she had been so impressed that she had finally helped with this company and was now chairman of it, and she was way out of her wheelchair and been leading a full life. And when she said that this magnetic wand, that you just put in water and drank the water, cost only eleven pounds ninety five, I thought “well, it’s got to be worth a try, I’ll see if it’ll do anything for my arthritis”. And so I sent off for this magnetic wand over the internet, and it came back almost by return in actual fact, and it was so simple to use that I gave it a try. And over the next few weeks, although it did absolutely nothing for my arthritis, I felt that I was feeling so much better. I mean, I’d felt well anyway, but I had so much wellbeing feeling and my energy levels were higher. And I said to my husband - well, my husband actually commented, he said “you’re so much better when you get up in the mornings these days”, and I’d laughed, and I said “oh well, it must be the magnetic water”. Well, I mean, I don’t know whether it’s psychological or whether it is the magnetic water, but I do honestly feel that it’s done me so much good that I would not stop taking it. I really do feel that it’s working wonders for me. Whether it is or not, I don’t know, but.

Has it made any measurable difference to your blood sugars or your insulin?

It has made considerable... I have dropped my insulin levels now to ten in the morning and six in the evening, from about, before I went on the magnetic water, they were eighteen in the morning and ten in the evening. And I find if I take any more insulin than that, it's too much; I just go hypo.

(13) Have you noticed any changes in attitudes to diabetes over the forty or so years that you've had it?

I think over the forty years, the attitude has been quite considerably different. I mean, initially, I myself knew nobody with diabetes, and even when I heard about my family members and that, it wasn't something that was talked about at all. Whereas now, I find that I... perhaps I'm talking about something and I'll mention it to a friend or somebody, and they're quite interested - they want to know all about it. And I think it's been on the media a lot more - it's brought into a lot more programmes, isn't it? So, I do think it's a good thing that it is, nowadays, much more upfront than it used to be years ago.

Have you noticed any differences in the way you're treated by the medical profession over forty years?

Well, certainly from my initial diagnosis with the GP, I felt that it was just something that came up in a consultation about anything else for maybe twenty odd years or so, whereas now, it is very much - I feel I must go to. And I think most people feel they have to keep their appointments if they're going to live with diabetes, and live happily with diabetes anyway, and keep themselves well.

And have you noticed any changes in the National Health Service?

I'm not sure actually. I suppose there must be. Certainly they're very anxious that you should attend all their sort of clinics and that sort of thing. I mean, they always send me... they give me an appointment at the end of my visit, and then they always send me a letter to remind me, to make sure that I do turn up and that sort of thing. And yes, I think... And the treatments, I'm sure, are much better than they were years ago.

Would your life have been any different if you hadn't had diabetes?

I don't really think so, no. I think I've been very fortunate in my life. Things have... I mean, there's been the odd blip obviously, but no, I just feel that things have gone... No, I don't think I would have made any different changes at all. Yes; I mean, I just sort of did what I wanted to do really. I started off with a career, which perhaps wasn't of my initial choosing, but I seemed to do reasonably well at it, and I had my son, and then I changed career when I had the opportunity, which gave me a lot of pleasure. I've enjoyed every minute of my nursing career. And I feel that in retirement, I can look back and feel that I've had a pretty good life.

And how do you see the future?

Just to carry on as I'm doing now. I'm very fortunate. I still have my husband with me, I have, you know, a home and lots of friends. I have my health, I

belong to various groups, I'm always busy, and things keep me going, and my family still. I just feel that I'm very, very fortunate, even having had diabetes. No, it hasn't worried me at all.

What advice would you give to someone being diagnosed with diabetes now?

I think to give it a little bit of time to actually take in and absorb what it really means. Find out what you can about it. If you don't get all the information you want from the medical profession, I do think it's worthwhile finding out information for yourself, because I feel that it's a long-term illness which can easily be coped with if you have the right information.

- (14) You only started going to a hospital diabetic clinic around twenty years ago. Can you talk about how the experience of attending a diabetic clinic in hospital has changed over those twenty years?

Well, it has changed to some extent. It was... I seem to remember, when I first went, it was a reasonable waiting time. But I was rather horrified at the waiting room at the old Radcliffe in the diabetes centre, because it was very, very small, and absolutely airless - there was no way you could open the windows, so I was rather glad, initially, that the waiting time wasn't too bad. But as the years went by, going every six months as I did, I found that the waiting times certainly got longer. And I think, as I mentioned before, I saw various different doctors - always a different doctor when I went to the clinic. But over the years, the specialist nurses seemed to take over quite a bit more of what was going on there. In fact, I'm sure we're all allocated a specialist nurse; I know I am, and if I have any problems at home, or anywhere really, all I have to do is ring up. In fact, I had a problem quite recently, in that my blood glucose meter broke. And I took it to the chemists, hoping they would be able to fix it for me, because it just seemed as though it needed resetting, and I couldn't do it. And they couldn't cope with it either, so I rang the specialist nurse, and she was extremely helpful. She went right through all the systems with me, as to do this, do this, do that, do the other, and when it still didn't work properly she said "well, can you come up tomorrow afternoon and we'll try and sort it out?". So, I went up there with this broken glucose meter, and she took one look at it and said "oh, I don't think we'll bother with that", she said "we'll find you a new one". And with that, she proceeded to bring out three different blood glucose meters from the cupboard. And we went through how they all worked and which one suited me fine, and she sort of said "right, well, there you are - take it home". And then, after two or three days, I had a phone call, and it was this very nice lady asking me how I was getting on with it. So, I really do feel that things have improved tremendously, because something like that, that's the sort of thing I couldn't cope with, you know. I can cope with how I feel, but when something technical goes wrong, I'm just not a really technically-minded person, I suppose. So from that point of view - yes, the clinics have improved tremendously.

Do you still see a different doctor every time?

I do, yes, I do. But there again I just... well, it's one of those things, isn't

it, with the National Health. I think if you go, you're very fortunate if you do see the same person all the time. And the only time I had that experience was when I was ill, really ill with my liver problem, and then I always did see the consultant every time I went back to the clinic for many weeks. I do feel that specialist nurses are extremely knowledgeable and very helpful. And I think it's really nice that one doesn't always have to see a doctor, which might mean quite a long wait, but one can just pick up the phone, and even if your own specialist nurse isn't there, there's always somebody who will speak to you and give you what help you require.

(15) Has your husband played any part in managing your diabetes?

Well, I think initially very little, but then myself, I wasn't so bothered about it, so I couldn't really expect him to even think about it. I suppose he was aware of it, just as I was, but it really was never a problem, so it wasn't any bother. But over the years, particularly since I went onto insulin, he has become very, very much more aware of it, and very, very supportive as well. He is always anxious to know how my blood sugars are, and will ask me almost every evening before I go to bed - am I all right and what are my blood sugars. I don't know whether he thinks I'm going to sort of cope with something through the night or whatever, but he is very, very conscious of it. And with my... any... if I'd any problems, like with my blood glucose meter, he said "oh well, you know, well I'll ring up and sort it out". I mean, he'll always do anything that will be helpful towards it. So I know that... although when I feel myself going hypo, I think he sometimes notices it as much as I do. I don't know whether my eyes glaze over, but I do get a bit confused and so I suppose that comes out. And he'll be looking at me, and I think "yes, perhaps he's right, perhaps my blood sugars are going a bit low", so I'll go and do a little test, and he'll be behind me wondering what's happening. But I'm fortunate, in that I do have warning signals, and so as soon as I start... I usually go quite sort of hot and then cold sweaty, I get a bit confused, and then I go a little bit sort of wobbly around the knees. So, with all these signals, I can usually nip it in the bud. I usually take four glucose tablets straight away, and then have something a bit more solid. If it's a meal time, I'll have my meal, or I'll have a sandwich or something like that. I do need to rest. I find that it's useful if you can just sit down, at least for a good half hour. Try and not fight it. I find that if I try to fight it, it's just a waste of time, because I do have to sit down initially, so. Four glucose tablets and half hours rest, and I'm okay.

So could you describe for me, then, a typical day or week in your life at the age of seventy six?

Well, I am pretty busy, and my husband and I, we do various things, both individually and together. We belong to groups. We belong to a U3A group, where we go every Wednesday in the centre of Oxford, and that has fifteen or so activity groups, many of which we belong to, like walking, photography, going out to lunch, history. You name it, we do it. And my husband belongs to a Probus group, which often involves the ladies, and all these interest groups as



well. We go out at least once a month on a sort of day trip somewhere. And my husband plays bowls, and I swim a couple of times a week, and we go walking on the days we don't do any other sort of exercise, but. I don't actually go to a keep fit class now, but I do have exercise tapes at home and I use those a couple of times a week. And we do the garden, and I think I said that we went walking a lot. And, I don't know, we're just sort of generally busy. It's usually Saturday and Sunday where we sort of do the shopping and the garden and the house cleaning, because from Monday to Friday we are pretty busy. And I just feel well and healthy, and the diabetes just doesn't come into my lifestyle really. I mean, it's just sheer routine now - early morning and before tea, and take my blood sugars and give my insulin injections. And I just don't even really think about it very much.