

(1) Tell me about your background.

Well, my parents. . . well, my mother's father had a business. But my father, he come from a very large family - about twelve or thirteen - and the house, or the cottage, he lived in backed onto a stream. And he just used to do gardening and that sort of thing, until he got experience in cars, and then he became a mechanic. And he worked in the garage, which was at the side of the flat where we lived in Bexhill. And my mother, she didn't go to work - she stayed at home, but she was. . . well, what can I say, not a very strong person, both in her mind and her body, you know. He was the strong man of the family. But I had one brother, Jack, and he was six years older than me. But we just used to live a normal village life - you know, go out to play on the green and skipping and running and all the rest of it, until I developed scarlet fever. That was the beginning of my downfall, that was. I came out from the isolation hospital and then was knocked over by a car, and they think the shock of the two things possibly brought the diabetes onto me. But my brother's developed diabetes in his later years, but he's only diabetes two - he's not on tablets or anything, he just has to be careful what he eats. But there was no sign of it in my family behind me at all, so I suppose it was possibly the shock that brought it out on me. But yes, I led quite a normal life. Went to school, and my mother always took sugar lumps to the school to give to the teacher in case I did become hypo, but I don't ever remember doing that at school.

Were you already at school when you were diagnosed with diabetes?

No, I started school after the summer term - that would be September, wouldn't it? Yeah, around that time. And, of course, it was only opposite our house at that time, so my mother could pop in and see how I was every half hour. Then, when I went onto the other school, the bigger school, I was on my own. Nobody bothered me at school though. I don't think they even knew what diabetes was, you know, because it wasn't all that common then.

What are your memories of being diagnosed with diabetes?

Ah, well, my mother said I was trying to drink the washing up water out of her bowl. I know I had this excessive thirst, and she called our doctor in, which was a local doctor, Dr Dunhill, from Bexhill-on-Sea. And he opened the front door, and he sniffed and he said "sugar diabetes" - that was before he'd seen me even. And he just came into the room to confirm he could smell the acetone on my breath, and immediately got me into hospital, which was the Royal East Sussex Hospital at Hastings. And, well, I suppose they put me on insulin straight away. To be quite honest, I don't remember that side of it.

This was before the creation of the National Health Service, so how did you afford a doctor in 1930?

Well, my father used to pay into a thrifts' club; I think it was about threepence a week or sixpence a week, and so that covered us with doctors and certain medicines.

Did it cover you for your insulin?

No, I had to go to East Sussex Hospital in Hastings to get that with my mother, once a month.

(2) What are your memories of your time in hospital?

The diet was cheese. I had cheese every meal and nightmares every night, because I'm a bit allergic to cheese! Used to keep the ward awake, so I wasn't very popular. But all they were doing, 'cause there were no blood sugar tests then, it was just urine tests, but every hour I had to pass urine so they could test it. And, well, that was, I suppose, to adjust the insulin, because they had no idea how much to give me, did they? They had to find out through the tests. But I was in for about a fortnight, I think, initially.

Can you remember either you or your mother being taught to do injections?

No, I can't remember her being taught, but she did them well. She must have been shown at some time - possibly while I was in hospital, you see.

And can you remember how the urine testing was done?

Yes, my father made me a little spirit lamp, which he... it was a ink bottle, and he put a wick up through the cork and filled it with methylated spirit. I had to light this wick to get the flame, and then I had to use Fehling's solution blue and white and just boil the uri... the test... over the flame and wait and see what colour it was. If it was blue I was negative, and the more orange it went... oh, green was all right - that was a trace, but the more orange it became, the more sugar I had in the system. So, in those cases, I used to be given a small dose of insulin and something to eat, like bread or something.

Do you know how often per day you had insulin at first?

Twice a day... well, yes, I say twice a day, but on the odd occasions, when my tests were exceedingly high, they had to give me small doses through the day to keep me level, you see.

Do you think that happened quite often?

Well, it did while I was in hospital, yes, it did.

And what were hospitals like in those days, compared with today?

Well, far better, I would say - they were more caring. And I was moved from the East Sussex Hospital to the Bexhill Hospital - we had a cottage hospital there - and I was really well looked after in there, you know. I think everybody took a pride in what they were doing, and yes, I must say the food improved, the beds improved,

(3) and even the injections improved, because they were using more sites on me then: legs, arms, stomach, backs of legs... what do you call it?

The calf.

The calf of the leg, yeah.

When you say improved, do you mean that the cottage hospital was better than the Sussex?

I think so, yes, I do think so.

And what were you taught about diet?

Well, I was given a Dr Lawrence's diet book, which was lines: black lines and red lines. Black was carbohydrate, red was protein, because at that time we had to weigh the protein as well as the carbohydrate. I can't remember quantities or anything, but I know my father used to use so many new pennies as the weight, and I had the equivalent in bread. And I lived on watercress! Watercress, lettuce, carrots, celery - you know, anything that was non-carbohydrate. And from the meat point of view, yes, I had meat every day - twice a day, I think - and eggs.

Was that difficult, to adjust to a new diet?

Well, I really can't say, because it's a thing that's happened automatically to me, you see, as I've got older and that. But I came off the Lawrence diet when I was about sixteen, I would say... sixteen, yeah, and I just used to assess my own food then. But I always weighed my carbohydrate, like the potatoes and the bread - I still do to this day. No particular reason, it's just a long standing habit, I think.

What sort of scales did you have originally?

Oh, they were just a flat back part where the weight was, which, of course, we used pennies on, and the scoop scale, like they would use in a shop to scoop up lentils or everything. That was the only type that was obtainable, or the only type my parents could afford. And as I got older, I used the little balance scales, which we used to get from Boots.

Were you quite hard up as a family?

Well, yes, my father only earned about three pound ten shillings a week, and that wasn't very much, because our rent was eighteen shillings a week - I do remember that.

So, was it quite hard for him to afford all these vegetables?

Well, we had an allotment, so he used to grow as much as he could. He used to grow all the potatoes and celery - yes, he used to grow celery and radishes, all that kind of thing. But from the fruit aspect, well, didn't often have fruit then, because it was expensive.

Have you any idea how often you did have fruit?

Well, always on a Sunday, I remember, being given an orange or an apple. Otherwise it was milk to drink to use up the carbohydrate amount that I was allowed, so I never had a lot of vitamin C. But I kept very well; not a lot of colds.

- (4) Have you any memories of how people reacted when you were diagnosed with diabetes?

Well, I think all our friends and family knew, because Mum had forewarned everybody, including the local shops not to sell me sweets, because I used to go in and get two pennyworth of coconut flakes, which were covered in sugar. But being a child, I had to have something. And, of course, next evening I was full of sugar, and once or twice I went into a coma because of it and was taken into hospital. But friends and family, as I say, they all knew, and everybody gave me sugar lumps, because at that time, that was the thing. Always carried four sugar lumps with me, but on the way to school we used to pass a field full of horses, so I used to give them the sugar lumps!

So, then you had no backup if you had a coma at...

None at all; just what the teacher had. But no, I don't remember having a lot, you know, when I was at school. I used to walk to school - mile and a half - and walk back in the evening, because, of course, we had no transport in those days and my parents couldn't afford the bus fares, so I just took it for granted that that was the thing to do.

How did people at school react to your having diabetes?

Well, the teachers, of course, they knew, but I don't think children had any need to know, because I was never really ill at school because of that, because of the diabetes.

Did you get any special treatment from the teachers?

Not at all, no, I was just one of the crowd. But they would look at me a bit odd at times, and I often wondered why, but, you see, they tell me nowadays I go ashly pale, white, when I need sugar, so the same thing might have happened when I was a child. But I don't remember anyone ever giving me any actually at school.

Did you do physical exercise like all the other children?

No, I was excused from that because of the diabetes.

So, the other children must have known that there was something different?

Well, they probably did, but at that age you don't think to... you know, I wouldn't have thought to have told them. As far as I was concerned, I couldn't see anything that was wrong with me, you know. I didn't think I was abnormal at all, not in the health aspect, anyway.

Can you remember at what age you started doing your own injections?

Yes, I can. I was fourteen and I done them at my home with my parents

- (5) watching me. But not regular - I didn't do them regular, because they used to insist that they done them. I never measured it up myself, because they always measured it up for me. And then the next time I remember

doing them on my own was on the ship when I was going out to Malta, when my husband was stationed there.

Well, we'll come to Malta later, but first of all, tell me what you did when you left school.

I worked in a grocer's shop. I worked in a shoe shop at first, but I didn't like that, so I went to a grocer's shop and gradually worked up to a provision assistant, which I was able to bone all the bacon and cut all the cheese etcetera, and then sell it, of course, over the counter. I did that, really, until I got married.

What were grocer's shops like in those days?

Well, big wooden drawers behind the counter, and the counters were all wood and they were polished. We had to weigh the sugar - during the war this was - we had to weigh the sugar and put into blue bags, and the flour. And any dried food that was obtainable, that was all weighed and put into bags. But it was a matter of weighing the food, pricing it and collecting the money, using the till to put the money in when you'd sold these items. But they're a bit different then to what they are today, I can tell you, because nobody uses their brain these days. It's all done through calculators, isn't it? And the tills themselves tell you the amount too, the grading on the articles, and what change has to be given. Well, we used to have to do all that - work it all out; pennies and ha'pennies, and farthings, even, in those days.

And what age were you when you left school?

Oh, fourteen, yes.

The Second World War broke out then when you were fourteen. How were you affected by that?

Well, actually, we were better off, because when everything was rationed and we all had our ration books, and I was allowed double rations of cheese, triple rations of meat, double rations of egg, double rations of milk. And I still had my sweet coupons in the back of the book, so anybody that wanted Mars bars used to use my coupons to get them. But no, actually, we were better off, from the aspect of the amount of food that came into the house, because of me.

So, did other members of the family eat your food?

Well, I'm sure they must have done, yes. If a meal was cooked, mine was in with it, wasn't it? Yes, they must have, because there was only actually my mother and father there, 'cause my brother joined the army when he was quite young, so he wasn't there.

What did you do after you stopped working in the grocery?

I think I continued working in the grocery till I was about twenty. Two different stores, I worked in - the Co-op and a private store - and then I got married when I was twenty.

(6) How did you meet your husband?

Well, I did take on this little part-time job in a house in Bexhill, and I was polishing the floor and this big commando came upstairs with his green beret on, and, of course, stood there talking to me. Well, from then we hit it off together. And that was how I met him. And we had dates and carried on till we got married in '45.

Where would you have gone on dates in those days?

Well, cinemas. Of course, living by the coast, there was always seats and that along the seafront to sit on, but mainly cinemas, or... well, with my parents, of course, and anywhere we could find a seat to sit on.

Tell me about your wedding in 1945.

Well, it was only a registry office wedding, because there wasn't much availability in clothes. We had to have coupons for clothes. My husband always says we got married in the right place - in Battle in Sussex, and we've been at battle ever since!

How did your husband cope with you having diabetes?

Well, I don't think he knew anything about it at the time, and most of the time he was away in the services, you see - he was a Royal Marine Commando. And we didn't have a lot of contact until, as I say, I went out to Malta and stayed out there for three years with him, because he was stationed there. And took Linda with me - she was about two and a half, I think. We sailed over on the Arundel Castle, which was very nice, and then our eldest son, Neil, was born while we were in Malta. And then he used to wonder why I was getting a bit floppy - you know, I'd sort of fall into a chair and things. "What's wrong?"; I used to say "well, I need sugar" - that was all I could say. So, I would either get a very sweet drink, which was difficult for me to swallow, or sugar lumps or a bar of chocolate, because he had no idea of quantities - he just used to give it to me. And eventually, of course, the hypo would pass, and then we talked about it, that these things did happen to diabetics and that, you see. And so then, he learnt how to do... well, I had to teach him how to do my injection, and he's done them ever since, even to today, except for when I've been in hospital or something

Now, we've really skipped over the birth of your two children. Were you worried about having a baby with diabetes?

Well, yes, I was, because my own doctor in Bexhill, he told me that diabetics shouldn't have children. Well, I've proved him wrong, because I've had four! And anyway, Linda was born - this is the eldest daughter - she was born in Hastings, while I was living in Bexhill. And then, as I say, I went to Malta. Neil was born there in Mtarfa, and then, when we came back to England, we moved to Gravesend in Kent.

- (7) Yes, our third son - well, our third child - was born in Gravesend; I had him in Gravesend Hospital. I was taken in in a coma, and they didn't quite know what to do with me. But, of course, my husband came in with me, and our doctor that we had there, Dr Dismore, he wouldn't give me any glucose or anything before I went into hospital, so they had to get me out the coma with glucose injections. And then I gave birth soon after that.

Why wouldn't the doctor give you any glucose?

Well, I don't know - they were strange people. They didn't understand diabetes, especially local practitioners, you know.

What year was this third birth?

This was the third one? 1950, he was born. They were born '45, '48, '50, and then our last child was born in Guy's Hospital in London by caesarean, because they did understand diabetes, and he was born in '52.

But the first three were not born by caesarean?

No, they were normal birth.

Were they big babies?

Well, Linda was seven-seven, Neil was eight pound, Glen was - he was small - six pound six ounces, and Colin was seven pound two ounces, so none of them were excessively big, were they?

Now, you say that at the time of the birth of your third child in 1950, the doctors really didn't know much about diabetes. Had that been your experience right up until that time?

Yes, and beyond! Wasn't so bad when we moved away from Gravesend, you know, but apart from... yes, when I had Colin in Guy's Hospital, they knew what to look for, you know. They were understanding, completely understanding - I had no problems in there. I didn't in Malta when I had Neil, nor Linda - no, I had no problems then - it's just the third one. I don't suppose it was his fault, but I was definitely in a coma needing the glucose. I've been in other comas when I've had excess sugar. I've been dosed up with insulin into the vein to get me out of those. Yes, that's a point... before Neil was born in Malta - that's right - they gave me,

- (8) I think he said, from what I can remember, he was going to give me eighty units of insulin, because my blood sugar was so high. And I was trying, pleading with them not to, because I knew I would go into a coma, which, of course, I did, just before he was born, actually when I was in labour. So, that was the reverse, then - they were pumping glucose into me. My arms were black and blue where they'd been injecting into the veins.

So, for one birth they refused you glucose and another birth they insisted on giving you glucose. Did you actually argue with them and explain why you disagreed with them?

Yes, I did. They were giving me insulin to get me out of the sugar coma, because I'd gone into a sugar coma. They were giving me eighty units of insulin. Well, the most I had all day was twenty units then, so I knew what was going to happen. And so, of course, they ended up injecting me glucose into the veins to get me out of the coma, so that was rather a trying time. I had a healthy son - it didn't do him any harm.

Did you encounter any good doctors or nurses, say until the 1950s?

Well, it's difficult to say, really. I've been in so many hospitals for so many different things that... yes, I think Guy's Hospital was terrific. What else can I say? Gravesend wasn't much good at all. Hastings was very good, where I had Linda. And, you see, the English staff - they were military nurses and doctors that we had in Malta - yes, they were very good, but this one doctor, he just didn't understand diabetes, I don't think; the consultant I was under.

How did you get on with General Practitioners?

Well, they're rubbish in my opinion, most of what I've come in contact with. They are, really.

What do you mean?

Well, if I go to them with a query, with the exception of the doctor I've got here now - he is very good - if I went to them with a query, you know, "I've been having too many high blood sugars", "oh, put your insulin up", "well, by how much?" I'm saying, "oh, four to six units". Well, I might like to point out that I have, in the whole of the day, I only have ten units. I have

- (9) two units of soluble and eight units of... no, sorry - Actrapid, and eight units of Insulatard, which takes me right through the night, right through to the next morning. And yet they will insist that I put it up four to six units, but I never do it. I think my husband understands me more than they do. He puts it up in very small amounts, even half a unit. He'll put it up gradually, but it always clears it. Might take a bit longer than they would take, but it does it.

Have there been any other occasions when your husband knew better than the doctors?

Yes, several, because when I was in Grove Park Hospital, because I contracted tuberculosis, he kept saying to the doctor that I needed glucose. He could tell I needed glucose, and the doctor said "no, no - it's just the tablets she's on", because I was on tablets for the TB. And he said "no", he said "she needs glucose". Well, about half an hour after he'd gone, they realised that I was nearly falling out of bed - I couldn't control my actions - so they soon gave me glucose then, to get me out. But several times when I've been in hospital, he's said that he could see I was coming up towards a coma, needing glucose - a hypo coma - but they all thought they knew better, so I just had to wait there, bide my time, till they realised. But I never went to hospital without... I took a packet of



biscuits and a jar of glucose, and I had to be prepared because they knew so little about it.

Can you remember what year it was when you had TB?

Oh yes. I think I had tuberculosis before Colin was born, because I had this terrible cough and pain at the back of my chest, which I told the doctor about. He pooh-poohed it. So, eventually I was coughing up blood. I went to see the doctor about that, so he sent me straight to Gravesend Hospital for an x-ray, which I had to bring back to him wet. And he read it there, and he said "oh yes, yes - you have got trouble with your chest". They took me into a sanatorium. I'll have to think now - which one was the first one? Well, I definitely had tuberculosis before Colin was born, and it was 1948 he was born, but it was 1950... no, he wasn't, sorry - he was born '52. It was '50 I started all this coughing business, so I must have carried him with the tuberculosis. And '52, after he was born - he was about six months old, I think - I started coughing up blood, so I saw the doctor and, as I say, I had these x-rays and that done, and then they sent me to a sanatorium.

- (10) It was Ashford sanatorium I was in, and my husband's a very strong man, a very strong-willed man, and he wasn't happy about the treatment I was getting there. They was injecting so many thousand litres of air into my diaphragm to push the lung up, 'cause I found afterwards I had a hole the size of half a crown in the bottom lobe of my right lung. And I had to go and have these - I can't remember what they called it - but this air injected into my diaphragm. About once a fortnight that was done, to try and push the lung up together. And the food I was getting in there was... well, it was more cabbage than anything - plates and plates of cabbage, because they too didn't understand diabetes; they didn't know how to feed me. And in the end, he decided he was going to take me home, which he did. He come and got me by train, and I stayed at home for a few weeks, and then, of course, I was really ill after that, and I had to go back to the doctor and was taken to Grove Park Hospital in London. That was where they eventually operated on me and took the lower lobe away. And that was where I had the trouble trying to make the doctor understand, or my husband did, that I needed glucose. I was in there, I suppose, getting on for two months, because they had to get me on me feet after the operation, and then I returned home. But all the children were put into care homes, because my husband had to work then - he was working at the BP refinery in Kent. He was a shift worker, and in between visiting the children and visiting me, he didn't have much time indoors, and he didn't have time to eat, even; he was losing weight. And we had to pay for all the children that were away in these nursing homes - well, children's homes. None of them were together - they were all in different places, so that was very upsetting for us.

What are your children's memories of that time?

Well, fortunately they don't seem to remember a lot about it, because they were reasonably young, weren't they? Two - Colin was two when he came home. Glen... well, Glen and Neil and Linda went up to my husband's mother in Newcastle. They stayed up there with her as long as she was able to keep them there, and then, of course, they had to come back and go into these homes which I'm telling you about. And they were all in different ones, which was very difficult for him. One was in Orpington, one was in Faversham in Kent, I can't remember... one was in Tunbridge Wells, so he had a heck of a life... and I was in Orpington.

How long did this life go on for?

Well, two years at least; must have been two years. Colin was just over two when he came back, because the others were going to school where they were in these homes, 'cause they were older.

(11) When did you recover from TB?

Well, finally, I suppose, after about five years, because when my husband was working, the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh were opening a new jetty down there where he worked. But nearly everybody in the village went, but I wasn't allowed to - too much excitement, I suppose. So, that was '54 that she came there, so I suppose it must have about '55 before I was really strong enough to look after the children. I had to have a home-help come in to the house while I was bad, before I, you know, was really cured, and because Bill did what he could, but there's a limit to what men can do.

How did you cope with the children and with diabetes after that?

Oh, very well, really. They knew if Mum wasn't well, what they had to do. They used to have to give me a very sweet drink, like... well, we never had Lucozade in those days, we couldn't afford it - but a glass of squash with a bit of sugar put in it to sweeten it even more, sweet biscuits - oh, I lived well through my children; they used to look after me when I was hypo. Even the neighbours knew - everybody knew how they had to deal with me.

Could your children read the signs?

Well, Linda might have done - the older one - yes, 'cause she used to say to me - ah, that's it - "Mum, you're talking funny", because I used to slur when I needed sugar. "Mum, you're talking funny - get something to eat", and she's still the same today and she's fifty seven. She still says "Mum, you need some sugar"!

What about your husband - was he good at reading the signs?

Oh, yes, most definitely - even to today. He's not quite so good today, because naturally we're that much older. But for a long time I didn't get any signs of hypos at all - no recognition at all. I just used to either collapse on the bed, fall on the floor, and I used to argue that there was nothing wrong with me, that I didn't need sugar; I used to reject it completely. And I fought with my husband. He's had to sit on my chest to get glucose into me during the night, and then,

of course, I'd vomit it back, so we'd start again - more sugar. But there were several occasions when he's had to get the doctor in to me, to inject glucose into me to get me out of these comas. But nowadays, I've got all the symptoms back: tingling in the legs, eyes funny, and, well, I quite often lose the use of my legs if I'm walking far, so I know how to deal with myself nowadays. But I was told by one of the diabetic nurses, during my course somewhere - I can't remember where - but she said "your symptoms will come back again", and sure enough they have, because for years, I never knew until someone was feeding something to me.

For how many years do you think you didn't know the symptoms?

Oh, well, I'd say five years or more. Must be five years or more, or more than that - ten years.

Were you worried when the children were small about having a hypo?

Yes, I was. This is why I warned all my neighbours what might happen, so that they could at least cope with them, you know, if I was on my back, flat on my back, because I never knew. If I didn't get the symptoms, I didn't know what was happening, you see, until it was too late, really. But they seemed to cope. They knew, I think, within a little, as I say. So, I managed all right.

(12) What do you think it's been like for your husband to have a wife with diabetes?

Pretty terrible, I should think - especially me being the patient. And when I've got these... I have a fifty year medal from the Joslin Foundation in Boston, Massachusetts, and the sixty year from the diabetic people here, I think it's my husband that should be having them, not me, because he deserves them more than I do. I've just had to live with it, but he's had to live with me, and deal with me when I've needed to be dealt with from the glucose point of view, and, like I say, he's done all my injections for me. And fortunately I'm not on a lot of insulin now, but I've had cataracts off, so I have difficulty in seeing the insulin in the syringe, so he does all that for me.

When did you begin to develop complications with diabetes?

Well, I don't think I've got complications. I had pernicious anaemia start in 1979, I had the cataracts off at '80 and the other one off at '84, but... oh, and I also got underactive thyroid, much the same time as the pernicious anaemia. And I was attending King's College Hospital in London as an outpatient in the diabetic clinic, and it was Dr Watson there that told me, because I'd got these two things and the diabetes, which was a triangle, I had no further complications, which, fortunately, I haven't had, up to now.

What do you mean about this triangle?

Well, I developed pernicious anaemia, which means I have to have a B12 injection once every two months, because I can't digest iron, and they have to put this in to give me the iron that's necessary. And underactive thyroid, which I have to

take a thyroxine tablet for once a day. And, as I say, Dr Watson in King's College told me that the triangle - being diabetes, pernicious anaemia and underactive thyroid - prevented me getting further complications, such as with my feet, kidneys... well, whatever else comes with diabetes.

Blood pressure?

Oh, I have got blood pressure, yes, I have got blood pressure, but that's recent - that's since we moved to Morecambe last year. Yeah, I have a Ramipril tablet for blood pressure and my Thyroxine every morning.

How do you find life taking all these tablets?

Well, it's only two a day - I can cope. After all these years of injections, taking tablets is a pleasure! Yes, there's no problem there.

(13) You seem to have a fairly low opinion of the medical profession in the first half of your life. Has that opinion changed?

Well, it has since we moved up here, because I've got a very good diabetic doctor here: Dr Routledge. He gives me thorough examinations for neuropathy and blood pressure. Whenever I see him, he does these tests on me. And I just go to the surgery for my diabetes - I don't attend a hospital here at all. But he's a very good doctor, and the very original one I had, Dr Dunhill, who discovered I was diabetes, yes, he was very good. He was a young man, just finished his teaching at Guy's Hospital, so everything was fresh in his mind. But in between times, they just say "oh, well, put your insulin up if necessary, put it down if you're too low - if your blood sugar is too low". But they don't seem to have any idea, the average doctor, you know, in the local surgeries.

What about diabetic clinics at hospitals. Have you attended those much?

Well, yes, I did. I used to go to St Bart's Hospital in Rochester, and yes, the nurses were... well, I wouldn't say above average - they just about coped, you know. Because if... they'd say to me when I arrived "oh, your blood sugar's a bit low, you'd better have a glass of milk", fair enough. But another time I would go, and I knew I was hypo, so I was trying to cope while they done the blood test on me, and then fill myself up with sugar afterwards. But they wouldn't ever recognise the fact that I was going hypo. In fact, one clinic I went to, one particular clinic - it was a diabetic, but I can't remember for what reason, specific reason - I even fell off the chair in the clinic. And after they'd given me glucose, I had to come home by bus. They never offered me an ambulance. But I was shopping in Chatham - this is all in the Kent area I'm speaking of now - in the shop in Chatham, and I don't know what happened. The next thing I know, there was an ambulance man there saying to me "you're a diabetic, you need sugar", so he gave me glucose in my mouth, you know, in water in my mouth. And then they took me to St Bart's Hospital in Rochester, and they kept me there for about two or three hours, didn't inform my husband, who was at home, and I wasn't in the state to ask them to do anything. And they did bring me home by an ambulance that time.

Have you any idea, round about, when that was?

(14) In the eighties, I would say, off hand.

It sounds as though your life has been quite crisis-ridden.

Well, I suppose it has to other people, but, do you know, you just take it in your stride. I just accept the fact that I'm a diabetic and I'm liable to go hypo, or the other way - hyper, so I just live with it. And I suppose if anybody's had it as long as I, they'll tell you the same thing, because you know it ain't nothing else.

How much would you say diabetes had affected your life?

Well, none actually, 'cause I've married a good man - met and married a good man - I've got four nice children, two of which live abroad now: one in New Zealand and one in Florida. And the one in Florida has developed diabetes - he's on insulin, and my daughter, Linda, she's a type two diabetic: she's on tablets and diet. But the other two, no symptoms at all; they lead a perfectly normal life - well, they all do, but they're the only two that have any sign of diabetes.

Do you think your life would have been different in any way if you hadn't had diabetes?

No, I don't. Yes, there's one thing I wanted to be was a nurse, when I was very young, but, of course, they wouldn't accept me, being diabetic. These days, doctors and nurses are diabetic, so I understand. So, I couldn't do what I wanted. That's one thing I was very interested in - medical things, I suppose because of my own self.

(15) Well, now, we've just had a tea break, and your husband mentioned that you went to a diabetic clinic at King's College Hospital for quite a while. Can you tell me about that?

Right, yes, I had to go somewhere different because the local doctor had put me on insulins which were just causing comas all the time. And they said that the two insulins that I was given should never have been mixed. Well, of course, we didn't realise this, you see. So, they took a long while, but they sorted me out - got me onto different insulin; onto a pork insulin.

Can you remember what the two insulins were that shouldn't have been mixed?

No, I can't. I can't remember the name of the two; it was too long ago. No, sorry, I've got no memory of that at all. But they put me onto pork Actrapid and pork Insulatard, which I'm still on. But the nurse in our local community, where we lived, tried me on the Lantus - the human insulin - and my tests were rushing up to thirty and over, so I wasn't able to absorb it. So, they took me off of that straight away and put me back on to Actrapid and Insulatard. For some reason, I have been warned not to use these human insulins, possibly because my body's just used to the animal type. I can't accept it for some reason. But this wasn't human that the doctors had put me on - the two that shouldn't have been mixed - according to Dr Lawrence, he was disgusted... Dr Watson, sorry -

he was disgusted that they'd put me on it. It took them quite a while to get me back to normal on an even flow, and they did look after me very well up there. But, of course, we had to go up by car. And it wasn't a very good area of London where the hospital was, and we were always very worried that the car wouldn't be there when we came out, 'cause we'd seen so many with the wheels off, the tyres off and everything. But I went there, I suppose, seventies, late seventies, eighties... no, it wouldn't have been - it would have been '80, '80 into '90. And since then, I must admit, I have kept a lot better.

What are your memories of going to the clinic at King's College Hospital?

Well, at that time we were allowed to smoke in the waiting room - everybody was allowed to smoke in the waiting room - and, of course, I did smoke. And when I used to get a bit annoyed about not being called on time, I used to light a cigarette, and you could guarantee you'd be called then!

How long did you smoke for?

I still do, from when I was fourteen.

How many do you smoke a day?

About six or seven. Because, as a youngster - say fourteen, fifteen - when I used to go out with my friends, maybe we'd go to the pictures, they used to be eating chocolates and ice lollies and all the rest of it, and I could never have it, you see. So, I said to my father "what can I take to the pictures with me, Dad?". He said "just have a cigarette". Of course, that started me off. I have had to break... intervals when... naturally when I got tuberculosis and when I was expecting the babies, but yeah, I still smoke, and I enjoy a cigarette. So, I mean, I must be proof that it doesn't do anyone any harm. I don't believe all these stories about you shouldn't smoke, personally, because during the war, I never saw a person that didn't smoke. It was the only thing that kept them going, especially the servicemen, you know, with all the trials and errors we had, with bombs landing on the doorstep. And another thing I've just thought of: I was walking to work during the war - now, I can't remember when particularly - but I was machine-gunned by a German plane that was coming across towards me, and I just happened to be in his path. So, I jumped the hedge into the playground - somebody's playground there - and that was a bit terrifying, I might add. But, however, I survived it.

Where were you living at the time?

Bexhill.

(16) You mentioned being allowed to smoke in the waiting room. Can you talk about your memories of hospital waiting rooms over the years?

Well, in particular, King's College was a huge room, and it didn't matter what was wrong with anybody, we all sat close together, you know. And, well, waiting time wasn't too bad in that case, but the local hospitals were a lot worse. In some cases they put up a board saying "the waiting time to visit the doctor is

expected to be...”, could be one to two hours, and some didn’t put any time on, so you had no idea, but... Well, I have waited, I must say, two to three hours. I always go prepared. I take a sandwich with me and a drink, because the minute you get up from your seat to go somewhere to get a sandwich, you’ll be called. But, as I say, here, I have no dealings with the hospital. We have a local clinic here - Queen Victoria - well, it’s called Queen Victoria Hospital - but that’s where I go to see the chiropodist. Otherwise, I just deal with the doctor in the surgery, and, as I say, he’s a very good man; very pleased with him.

Now you’ve mentioned the chiropodist. What’s the state of your feet?

Well, excellent, according to her. I’ve not got any corns, bunions or nothing. Nothing at all - not even hard skin, so I suppose I’ve been lucky there. But mind, I’ve always looked after my feet. I wash ’em every day with soapy water, so I have always looked after them, and I’ve always gone to a chiropodist. Fortunately it’s free.

You mentioned earlier that you got a Joslin medal for fifty years, so that must have been 1980. How did that come about?

Well, my local doctor at the surgery where I went then, Dr Ruggles, he realised it was fifty years I’d been diabetic, and he asked me did I know the name of the doctor that diagnosed me. Well, yes I did, and I told him, and fortunately he was still alive, so he was able to contact him. And he sent a letter verifying the fact that he’d diagnosed me as diabetic in - I can’t think of the year now... he diagnosed me in 1930, so he wrote a letter. And my doctor contacted this Joslin Foundation in Boston, Massachusetts, and they sent this - it’s a copper medal; it’s a huge thing, in a case. That’s how I came by that one. And the fifty year old, fifty year medal, I got again through my diabetic nurse in Hoo, and when I’d had diabetes for sixty years, she said “you should get another medal”. So, she applied to Diabetes UK, and they sent me another fifty year medal, because they hadn’t made any sixty year medals. But now I’m waiting for the seventy year medal, which I believe I get next year. So that’s it - actually, I’ve got three, but it should have been a different type - a sixty year old - but they didn’t make any.

(17) With nearly seventy five years experience of diabetes now, what advice would you give to somebody being newly diagnosed?

Well, to accept the fact, because you can’t escape it. But I’ve always been very, very careful with my food. I still, to today, weigh my bread. My potatoes, I know - three egg sized potatoes - but I still weigh my bread, and I do not eat the likes of cakes, biscuits, ice-cream, anything like that. I keep a balanced diet, and I think that has got a lot to do with it. Because these days, they seem to suggest that people are able to eat anything, but how many people are going to live to seventy five years of diabetes if they eat all these sweet things? They must get some complications through it; it’s pretty obvious, even to me. And I think wrong advice is given to people, because nurse and doctors just can’t be bothered. Instead of sitting down and explaining what might happen through

eating the wrong sorts of things, they just tell you - which has been told to me by dieticians - "you can eat anything you like". Well, to me, that's completely wrong. Maybe I'm wrong - I wouldn't like to say, but you're not going to tell me that a person on insulin who has to watch their blood sugars - which I do twice a day, by the way - and can sit down and eat a slice of gateaux or whatever without it having some reaction. The thing, of course, is with this newer insulin and the insulin pumps, people are inclined to just shoot more insulin into their selves. Well, I'd just like to add this. I've got a daughter-in-law, who lives in New Zealand, and she was diagnosed about twenty five years ago, and she's on these insulin pumps. Well, she's a very hardworking girl, and she goes out to work, she looks after her husband and two children. And her husband, Colin, was saying to me the other night on the phone that he'd had to have the St John's Ambulance into her again, because she finds her blood sugars a bit in between, neither low nor high - where it should be in actual fact. But because June's going to eat a meal afterwards, she gives herself about eight units of the long acting insulin at five o'clock in the evening. Well, that's going to last her all through the night, and if she's not eating

- (18) all through the night, which, of course, she isn't, then she gets these bad hypos. It's not readable on the meter even - it's below zero. And he has to get the Red Cross people in to give her glucagon - two injections of glucagon usually, and then she goes onto sweet food after that. But that's just one example, because June will eat anything that's put in front of her. "Oh, a little bit of that won't hurt" sort of attitude, you know. But I wonder if she'll be as healthy as I am in fifty years time. These are the things I'm trying to point out to people. I mean, I'm no medical expert. I can only go by my own experience, but I think the wrong advice is given to diabetics, especially those on insulin.

From your seventy years of encounters - over seventy years of encounters - with doctors and nurses, what advice would you like to give to student doctors and nurses who may listen to this interview?

Well, as I say just previously, that people should be told to eat certain things, you know. I mean, I'm on a gram diet. I should have a hundred and eighty grams per day, and I maintain that, whereas if you sit and eat a slice of cake, that's over two hundred grams for a start. It's got to do something to your body, so my advice is to anybody that's teaching, or new to insulin, diabetes, to be very careful what they eat.

And would you have any advice to doctors or nurses about the attitude they should adopt to patients?

Well, yes, in my circumstances I've met very funny attitudes: people that laugh at you, doctors or nurses that laugh at you, because you, you know, you're telling them your experience, something that's happened to you, and they laugh. And then again, I've been told by dieticians "it's a waste of time coming to see me, because you know more about it than I do", so... But that's the wrong attitude.



They should learn it all and advise people, shouldn't they? This is what I think. Teach them not to eat these very sweet things

- (19) Can you summarise some of the technical changes you've seen in blood testing and in using insulin?

Well, of course, when I was first diagnosed, and for a great many years afterwards, we had the glass syringes and the needles, separate needles, which had to be boiled after each use, dried, and then it was always urine that was tested, never blood. But, as I say, when I went to King's College Hospital, they put me straight onto blood testing, the strips, which are so much easier. Just takes a few seconds against about ten minutes. And you can't boil pots of urine if you're travelling and that, which, of course, I have done in my life, but you can take a blood test in a car. Just a little prick of the finger, and it's so much easier. And, of course, the syringes that we've got these days with the needle attached, one-use only, they're easily disposed of, if you get a sharps container. So, yes, it's altered very, very much in my lifetime. And it's tolerable now, where at first, being only a child, I was naturally looked after by my parents. But I have gone... I've been abroad. I've been to Australia - both my husband and I have been to Australia in 1976, but there's just one snag with that. Even the doctors at King's College wouldn't advise him on my doses of insulin, so he had to sit down and work it all out, changing the hours, because there's a eight to ten hours difference travelling to Australia, and he had to adjust all my insulin and all my food on the way. Well, we travelled by Qantas Airline, and we told them I was diabetic and on a diet, and they were very, very good. They gave me my meals the same time as I would be having them in England, gradually broke me into the Australian time, and the same coming back. They were very, very helpful; I've got to say that for them. But we got no advice on what to do. If I hadn't got a husband like I had, I don't think I would have dared gone, because while I was over there, change of food and everything, I was very high blood sugars all the time, but I never went comatose, so I suppose it wasn't that bad. But we stayed there for about six weeks with our son, daughter-in-law

- (20) and their new child, as he was then, in South Australia. It was very nice, but I was glad to come back to England.

And what would you say keeps you going?

Well, you know the old saying - it's being so cheerful that keeps you going. It's a matter of... it's the routine, which I have to have. I eat my food at a certain time. I know I might sound a bit boring to some people, but I do. I make sure I have my injection, do my test, have my injection in the morning, and then have my food about quarter of an hour afterwards. And then mid-morning, I have biscuits and coffee - just Rich Tea biscuits: two. And lunch at half past twelve, sandwich at three o'clock, evening meal at half past six, and three Rich Tea biscuits before I go to bed. So, having that routine, it makes you, you know, you've got to get up, you've got to do these things, and it just comes natural.

And do you have much exercise?

Well, I do as much as I can. I mean, this is quite a large flat that we're living in, and I always say to my husband, I feel I've walked the promenade when I've been to and fro here a few times during the day. I know it's important to have outside exercise, and we go to the shops and that most days, so yes, I do have exercise, but I'm not a great walker; never have been.

So, do you enjoy your life now?

Oh yes, I do. It's a very nice place to live, Morecambe. There's beautiful views from the promenade. We see right across to the Lake District, all the hills, and we can see the Pennines, and we have the bay, of course, which is always full of birds. Oh, it's really a lovely place to live, so we do enjoy life, both Bill and I.