

April 2010

AGM Reminder

The annual General Meeting will be held at the Alma Centre on Wednesday May 12th. All members are invited to attend.

Members Book Review

The West Highland Way with a Wheelchair by Sandy Gibson

Written with the passion and optimism of such a determined lady, Sandy writes in such a conversational way that any reader is teleported on the walks with them.

This book is such an uplifting read giving anyone a boost, Sandy and John show even the impossible is possible, with the love and support of a partner and friends. The photo's and elaborate detail make the images come to life in your mind. The ups and downs endured by Sandy and John are remarkable and the determination of two people defies all laws.

A superb read for anyone who wants a good giggle, an informative read or simply a realistic view of the Scottish highlands.

Sandy brings reality and fantasy to life and shows everyone, anything is possible if you put your mind (or wheelchair) to it.

(This book was written by one of our members Sandy Gibson, should you wish to obtain a copy please contact her or Carol) by Neil Atkinson

www.mstrust.org.uk 23 March 2010

John Hicklenton passes away

I'm terribly sad to hear the news that artist John Hicklenton has passed away.

Regular readers will be aware that although still a young man (alas no proof against illness) John was fighting against MS and the prognosis was not good. By all accounts Johnny did not go gentle into that dark night but raged, raged against the dying of the light, speaking out on his affliction, raising awareness of the problems sufferers endured and being the subject of a Grierson award winning documentary, **Here's Johnny**, which went out on UK TV.

The 2000 AD forums broke the news via Pat Mills, who said of John: "John Hicklenton passed away peacefully last week. His ending was an expected one and he saw it as a triumph over his illness MS. Amongst his final words to me were "MS - you have a week to live, you've met someone you shouldn't have f***** with". A great artist and a true hero."

John's art style was pretty unique - I must admit the first time I came across it in 2000 AD I wasn't sure what to make of it, but pretty soon I came to think it was simply brilliant, scratchy, dark, often disturbing and so well suited to tales like Nemesis (one of the eternal delights of 2000 AD to me has been introducing me to new artists and writers I might never otherwise have come to love). The usual thing to say at times like this is 'after a long illness he finally lost the battle', but from what those who knew him far better than I are saying Johnny didn't see it as losing the battle but taking the damnable disease with him, with both barrels blazing. Goodbye, John, you will be missed. **Author: Forbidden Planet blog**

Our fight for the sunshine vitamin that prevents MS

JUST two days after landing in Australia for a family holiday, Kirsten McLaughlin began to feel better. The 35-year-old mother wasn't just enjoying the feel-good buzz we all enjoy on a well-deserved break. Kirsten, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) four years ago, found that her symptoms – particularly her crippling fatigue – had improved in the strong sunshine. A month later, the family flew back to the UK and Kirsten, a former tae kwon do champion, became just as ill as before. Her son Ryan recalls: "The effects of the sun on mum were amazing. I did some research and found that sunshine produces vitamin D. I also found that Scotland, which does not get much sun, has one of the highest rates of MS in the world."

Last year Ryan, 14, from Drumchapel, Glasgow, launched the Shine on Scotland campaign. Its aim is to ensure all children and pregnant women in Scotland receive free vitamin D supplements. "I don't want other people to go through what my mum has been through," he says. "I believe that taking vitamin D will prevent thousands of people developing MS."

Ryan's campaign is backed by many neurologists and author JK Rowling, whose late mother had the disease. It is becoming increasingly clear that vitamin D and some other environmental and genetic factors have a significant role to play in MS.

Until a few years ago scientists had little understanding of what caused the disease. All they knew was it becomes more prevalent the further you are from the equator and that there is a genetic element. It was also thought a virus might trigger the disease.

Recent research, however, means scientists might soon be able to predict those at risk of developing MS and even prevent some cases.

Gavin Giovannoni is a professor of neurology at Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry and the co-author of a report into environmental factors affecting MS to be published next month.

It's clear one reason some people are more likely to get MS the further they live from the equator is the lack of sunlight," he says. "The incidence of the disease has been increasing over the past few decades, particularly in women. It's no coincidence that this has happened at the same time women have begun to avoid the sun and that sunblock has been put in make-up products."

"Since the Islamic revolution there has been an epidemic of MS in women," says Professor Giovannoni. "This can only be because they are now covered from head to toe and are no longer exposed to the sun."

Research has also shown babies born in April or May – who grew in the womb during the winter months – are the most likely to get MS in later life, while those born in November are at much lower risk.

Another study published last year found evidence vitamin D deficiency during pregnancy and infancy could increase a child's risk of developing MS later in life.

The study established a direct relationship between a gene variant known as DRB1*1501 and vitamin D. While one in 1,000 people in the UK are likely to develop MS, this number rises to around one in 300 among those carrying a single copy of the variant and one in 100 of those carrying two copies.

Professor Giovannoni says: "Lack of vitamin D doesn't cause MS on its own but it's an important factor. Supplementing with the vitamin could mean some people who are susceptible to MS don't go on to develop it.

"We've also identified a link between MS and the Epstein-Barr virus, which is responsible for glandular fever. If you don't get the virus, your chance of getting MS is almost zero.

"The problem is 95 per cent of the population is infected with Epstein-Barr at some time. Scientists are working on a vaccine to prevent the virus and if they are successful, it could potentially have a massive impact on rates of MS."

Dr Susan Kohlhaas, of the MS Society, says: "Researchers have thought for a long time that a combination of genes make some people more susceptible to developing MS.

However these are also common in the general population. Genes are only part of the story though and other environmental factors, such as vitamin D deficiency, exposure to certain viruses and lifestyle factors like smoking have also been implicated in MS."

The French government has recently begun giving vitamin D to pregnant women. Professor Giovannoni, who says low levels of vitamin D are also implicated in many other diseases such as cancer and Type 2 diabetes, believes the same should be done in the UK.

He says: "We estimate that if you are vitamin D replete throughout your life you can probably lower your risk of developing MS by up to 85 per cent. I am sufficiently convinced to be giving my own daughters vitamin D supplements."

www.bbc.co.uk 5 April 2010

Doctors to give 'fit notes' instead of sick notes

Workers who are off sick for longer than seven days will from now on receive so-called fit notes instead of sick notes from their GPs.

Doctors will still be able to say someone is not fit for work, but they will also be able to spell out aspects of jobs workers can still perform.

The onus will be on employers to help staff return to work in some capacity.

But the British Medical Association says more needs to be done so firms understand their responsibilities.

The overhaul of the sick note system was announced a year ago by government adviser Dame Carol Black, the national director for health and work.

She calculated that ill-health was costing the economy £100bn a year.

The Statement of Fitness for Work, or 'fit note', is a new medical statement that doctors will now be issuing. It is relevant to all employers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

With the fit note the doctor will be able to advise their patient if they are "not fit for work" or a new option - "may be fit for work taking account of the following advice".

Patients will then be encouraged to discuss this advice with their employer to see if they can return to work.

Heather Matheson, human resources consultant: "There may be some conflict"

Dr Laurence Buckman, chairman of the BMA's GPs committee, said: "The responsibility will be on employers to act.

"If a GP decides their patient is capable of some form of work, for example if they've got back pain and they should temporarily avoid elements of their normal job, then it will be down to the employer to be flexible enough to accommodate them.

"However, we think much more needs to be done to ensure employers, in particular local line managers, have enough information about the changes."

And he said GPs would have to ensure they were not "drawn in to making comments they are not qualified to make" because they would be unaware of the details of a patient's working conditions.

Dr Buckman added: "Employers have a responsibility to provide adequate occupational health services and the government must encourage them to provide that if the overall plan to help more people back to work is to be truly effective.

"But, unfortunately, only one worker in eight has access to an occupational health doctor."

A thousand GPs have been trained by the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) in how to complete the new forms.

Professor Steve Field, of the RCGP, said: "There has been a lot of preparation for GPs, for employers, and employees but inevitably there will be some that are not up to speed.

"The launch of fit notes is going to be revolutionary because it will change the whole culture and we know that keeping people in work helps their physical and mental wellbeing."

Katja Hall, director of employment policy at the Confederation of British Industry, said: "This is a change that employers will welcome.

"All too often a person is signed off sick when they are able to manage some forms of their work."

However, unions have warned that handing someone a list of tasks they could perform while ill would not help them get back to full fitness.

Some GPs have been frustrated with the current system because they are unable to assess what work an employee can do if they do not know what their workplace responsibilities are.

Under the current system, a GP has the power to sign someone off work for six months before the case is passed onto a benefits administrator.

About 350,000 people a year transfer from sick notes to benefits, a figure which experts believe could be cut significantly with earlier and more effective intervention.

Occupational health facts

- 172 million working days lost through sickness in 2007
- This cost more than £100bn in lost productivity
- 2.6 million people were on incapacity benefits in May
- Absences of four days or more account for 40% of days lost
- Nearly six million people in the UK say they have a long-standing health condition

Source CBI; Black Report

DISCLAIMER

Articles in this Bulletin are meant for the sole purpose of information only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the committee.

Hopes rise in the battle against MS

BY MIRIAM STOPPARD IN TODAY'S HEALTH TOPIC

I'm delighted when research makes promising discoveries to treat the debilitating disease multiple sclerosis.

I have personal experience of this horrible condition as two close friends have it - one of whom I diagnosed myself.

Two new pills, fingolimod and cladribine, could be available by next year which will mean fewer hospital trips, injections and intravenous medication for sufferers.

But this is just one of several exciting studies going on in the field of MS. And, although a cure isn't yet imminent, we're slowly piecing together parts of the jigsaw to understand the disease.

What is MS?

Around 100,000 people in the UK have MS. It's the most common disabling disorder for young adults, with women twice as likely to develop it as men.

It's an autoimmune condition where your immune system, which normally helps to fight off infections, starts to attack your own myelin - the protective sheath surrounding the nerve fibres that carry messages between your brain and body.

As myelin is stripped from the nerve fibres, leaving scars known as lesions, these messages are interrupted. This triggers symptoms ranging from headaches, dizziness, numbness, visual disturbances and muscle weakness to severe paralysis.

Why it comes and goes

For most people, MS begins as a relapsing-remitting condition, meaning symptoms appear (a relapse), and then fade away (remission). Every relapse causes more damage to the body and, even though symptoms retreat, the sufferer never returns completely to normal. Most people with relapsing-remitting MS eventually develop "secondary progressive" MS - the more aggressive form of the disease which causes rapid deterioration.

The latest treatments

Once diagnosed, MS stays with you for life but drugs can help manage symptoms and cut relapse time, reducing accumulative damage. At the moment, these are given either as an injection or as an hour-long infusion into a vein, at hospital. Steroids can be given to treat relapses as they reduce inflammation and speed recovery time.

Because MS waxes and wanes, it can be difficult to know if a new treatment is having an effect or if the sufferer is just in a period of remission.

What causes MS?

We don't know - and it's what a lot of the current research is trying to find out. There seems to be some link between MS and vitamin D deficiency and, for many years, doctors have thought a virus such as Epstein-Barr, which causes glandular fever, could be the trigger. It might be that the virus switches on a gene which makes the body attack the myelin.

We do know that MS is not contagious and developing it has nothing to do with your lifestyle.

It's possible that a combination of certain genes make some people more susceptible than others.

THREE ADVANCES TO RELIEVE SUFFERING

(1) Oral pills

New research published in the New England Journal of Medicine found that two new pills are as effective at reducing relapse rates as the current injections.

The once-a-day pill fingolimod, and cladribine - which is taken 20 to 40 times a year - should be available by next year.

This will mean no more going into hospital for painful injections. The MS Society plans to campaign for these pills to be on the NHS.

(2) Vitamin D

Scientists are finding more evidence about the significance of vitamin D in the development of MS. It's long been known that the further you live from the Equator, and the less sunshine you get, the more likely you are to develop MS.

This seems to be linked to a shortage of vitamin D, the nutrient made by the action of sunlight on skin.

Research has also shown that babies born in May - who developed in the womb during vitamin D-scarce winter months - are more likely to get MS in later life.

Another study found evidence that vitamin D deficiency during pregnancy could increase a child's risk of developing MS in later life. And Australian researchers found the higher an MS sufferer's level of vitamin D, the lower their chance of relapse. Research is now looking at what would be a therapeutic dose.

(3) Stem cells

This is perhaps the most exciting area of research, as it's the only one that shows promise in reversing the nerve damage caused by MS.

A recent study looked at the effect of injecting patients in the early stages of MS with stem cells taken from their own bone marrow. It found that symptoms in four out of five patients improved after three years. The rest saw their condition stabilise.

The injected stem cells appear to head to parts of the nervous system damaged by MS and repair them.

But it was only a small trial and the challenge is proving effectiveness in trials involving large numbers of people.

It's been brilliant for me - with no side-effects

Elizabeth Kinder, 40, a musician from London, was one of just 16 people in the UK who took part in a clinical trial for the new drug fingolimod...

"Three years ago I started getting pins and needles in my arms, **legs** and face. I became really dizzy, unbalanced and strangely disconnected - like I was in a goldfish bowl in a storm at sea.

I was afraid I had a brain tumour so, when I was diagnosed with MS, it initially came as a relief. But when I relayed the news to a friend, she said: 'That's dreadful. How long have you got before you're paralysed?' But my doctor reassured me that MS affects everybody differently and I may never be paralysed. I was keen to take part in a clinical trial, as there's a lack of effective medication for MS. Initially I was given an established treatment injected into my thigh once a week with a huge needle. It was unpleasant and painful and gave me flu-like symptoms, and I wasn't on it long enough to know if it worked for me. Then I was given fingolimod pills, which I've found brilliant.

I've been on them for more than two years and had no side effects and I do believe they've helped stave off my MS, as I've only had one relapse.

Thirty years ago, if you were diagnosed with MS, you'd have been told to come back when you needed a wheelchair, as little could be done. But treatment really has improved and I think, in 20 years' time, they'll have found a cure."

YOUR JOKES

The following questions were set in last year's GCSE examination in Swindon , Wiltshire. These are genuine answers (from 16 year olds)

1. Q. Name the four seasons
A. Salt, pepper, mustard and vinegar
2. Q. Explain one of the processes by which water can be made safe to drink
A. Flirtation makes water safe to drink because it removes large pollutants like grit, sand, dead sheep and canoeists
3. Q. How is dew formed
A. The sun shines down on the leaves and makes them perspire
4. Q. What causes the tides in the oceans
A. The tides are a fight between the earth and the moon. All water tends to flow towards the moon, because there is no water on the moon, and nature abhors a vacuum. I forget where the sun joins the fight
5. Q. What guarantees may a mortgage company insist on
A. If you are buying a house they will insist that you are well endowed
6. Q. In a democratic society, how important are elections
A. Very important. Sex can only happen when a male gets an election
7. Q. What are steroids
A. Things for keeping carpets still on the stairs
8. Q. What happens to your body as you age
A. When you get old, so do your bowels and you get intercontinental
9. Q. What happens to a boy when he reaches puberty
A. He says goodbye to his boyhood and looks forward to his adultery
10. Q. Name a major disease associated with cigarettes
A. Premature death
11. Q. What is artificial insemination
A. When the farmer does it to the bull instead of the cow
12. Q. How can you delay milk turning sour
A. Keep it in the cow
13. Q. How are the main parts of the body categorised (eg the abdomen)
A. The body is consisted into 3 parts - the brainium, the borax and the abdominal cavity. The brainium contains the brain, the borax contains the heart and lungs and the abdominal cavity contains the five bowels: A,E,I,O and U

MEMBERS COMPETITION

A £5 prize will be given to the member whose entry has the most correct answers. Even if you do not know all the questions, send in those you have answered – you could still win!

USING ONE OF THE INITIAL LETTERS FROM EACH ANSWER WILL GIVE YOU THE NAME OF A LOCAL TOWN OR VILLAGE

- 1/ Surname of the Russian winner of the 1990 Nobel Peace prize
- 2/ Nickname given to the Military Police
- 3/ Diamond is the birthstone of this month
- 4/ Colour of the Rainbow
- 5/ Michael Heseltine's nickname
- 6/ One of the Great Lakes
- 7/ Capital of Norway
- 8/ Chess piece
- 9/ Bone in the leg
- 10/ Active volcano in Sicily

Name:

Address:

Send Completed Forms To:
Mr D Henderson
74 Windermere Road
Stockton-on-Tees
Cleveland TS18 4LY

All entries to be received by the next social. The winner will be drawn from entries received with the highest number of correct answers.

Answers to last quiz:

- 1/ Panorama 2/ Would I Lie To You 3/ The Gadget Show 4/ Songs of Praise 5/ Country File 6/ Time Team
7/ Golden Balls 8/ Come Dine With Me 9/ Deal or No Deal 10/ Wildest Dreams 11/ National Lottery 12/ Flog It
13/ How Clean is Your House 14/ Eastenders 15/ Bargain Hunt 16/ Neighbours 17/ Match Of The Day 18/ Friends
19/ Vets in Action 20/ Newsround