

Erica's story

I was diagnosed with hep C in 2002, and as I was pretty asymptomatic I was reluctant to try treatment, but I finally decided to give it a go in 2006. I was genotype 1a which meant I had to be on treatment for a year. It involved daily doses of Ribavirin and weekly injections of peg-interferon. It soon became apparent that for me the treatment was worse than the condition. The problem was the injections. The drug came in a 'pen' with a very fine needle, and you injected into the fat on your lower abdomen or your upper thighs in rotation. Now interferon is highly toxic, and I developed very red, sore, itchy patches at those sites. The rash would last about four weeks, which meant that just as it was getting better the injection came round again.

The treatment made me feel dirty, yukky for some reason. How I hated those patches of rash! Then I messed up an injection somehow and half of the liquid ran down my thigh. I still don't know how I managed that: grabbing a handful of fat and sticking a needle into it isn't exactly rocket science. My hands must have been shaking. Even now I find writing this quite distasteful, probably because it reminds me how I got hep C in the first place (injecting drugs with a shared needle). Those injections cost a lot of money - I was told £250 for each 'pen' - so I felt really bad about wasting one. I even wondered if my unconscious was sabotaging the treatment.

Then I developed a chest infection and was put on penicillin, which resulted in a rash all over my body. I remember standing in the shower and wanting to take sandpaper to my skin. Apparently I had now become allergic to penicillin.

So things were definitely not going well. I didn't take any time off work but I felt increasingly unwell. I wished I could turn myself inside out to get rid of that virus by scrubbing it away, or something. I think at that point the treatment must have been affecting my intellect as well as my emotions. I was definitely not thinking rationally at times.

I had my 12-week blood test, and the result was due on a Friday afternoon. My lovely treatment nurse waited and waited, not wanting me to have to go through the weekend without knowing. I remember exactly where I was when my mobile rang. She said, 'Are you sitting down?' and I knew instantly that the treatment hadn't worked. My viral load was down to 5000. Very very low, but still detectable.

So close, and yet so far away.

Since it was pointless to continue, was I upset at having to stop the treatment? No, I was not. My lovely consultant, who was gentle and sympathetic, was surprised at how well I took it. In fact, I was relieved. I was more than happy to give it up.

So ten years went by, and I saw my consultant regularly, who would tell me about new treatments being developed, in which I took no more than a polite interest. But last year he finally persuaded me to try again. Treatment had changed out of all recognition, and many people described it as 'a walk in the park.' And they were right. I took Ribavirin, Exviera and Viekarex for twelve weeks. The drugs were delivered to my door every four weeks. I saw a treatment nurse and had regular blood tests, the first one a mere two weeks after starting the treatment. And to my utter and lasting astonishment, that first blood test showed the virus was undetectable, and so it has remained.

I finished my course about a month ago. I cannot write anything dramatic or interesting or appalling about this treatment. I just took the pills and felt fine. But it's turned out to be a MIRACLE CURE. I still haven't quite got my head round the fact that, after living with this virus for 44 years, I'm now free of it. I don't know what this will mean for me in the long term. I've had a liver ultrasound and a gastroscopy recently, and my consultant will continue to keep an eye on me for the foreseeable future. So far the benefit has been mostly psychological. I feel CLEAN again. It's only now that I'm beginning to realise how having this virus for all those years has affected me emotionally. But that is another story.