
Living with Hepatitis C as a Nurse

Debi Ripley

My name is Debi Ripley. I am a 46-year-old mother of two teenaged children and I am a non-practising nurse although I am taking my nursing refresher course. I have hepatitis C and probably became infected in the late 1970s or early 80s. I wasn't diagnosed until 1995.

I have a few risk factors for hepatitis C: I was an operating room registered nurse for 15 years (health care workers have a 10% risk of contracting hepatitis C, and the emergency and operating rooms have an even higher risk due to the constant presence of blood), and I received a blood transfusion after a caesarean section for my son in 1983.

I worked as a scrub and circulating nurse in operating rooms in my hometown of Moncton, New Brunswick, as well as Edmonton and Calgary, Alberta, and four different trauma hospitals in Riverside and Los Angeles, California. Many times I had been cut with dirty scalpels and suture needles. Universal precautions only help to take care of surface blood.

Due to the progression of my disease, my specialist feels that I was first infected in the O.R., then re-infected by a tainted blood transfusion. All I know is that I became progressively sicker since 1985 when I became pregnant with my second child.

Through the years my illness remained undiagnosed although I ran the gamut of symptoms – irritable bowel syndrome, pain in my right upper abdomen, constant aches in my joints, muscles and bones with an unexplained rheumatoid factor,

headaches, decreased resistance to infections (in California I had meningitis, encephalitis, and several bouts of pneumonia back at home), depression, insomnia, extreme fatigue, and weight loss.

By the time I became too sick to work, I had lost my job in California and consequently lost my house, furniture, my husband and car, and sold my personal possessions to come home. All the doctors I had seen for these vague but real symptoms came to the same conclusion: I was overly stressed and, as a woman, these symptoms were “all in my head” – psychosomatic.

In desperation I was forced to accept social assistance and finally I consulted the family doctor in one last call for help. In the many blood tests he discovered that my liver enzymes were more than double the high normal. A subsequent hepatitis C test proved positive.

I was relieved, devastated and puzzled all at the same time. Relieved to know that there was a name to this illness, yet devastated to think that I had a “terminal” disease and that there was a real possibility of losing my career. I was puzzled because, even being a nurse, I was not sure what hepatitis C was. I also had to face the probability that I unknowingly accidentally infected patients.

But knowing that I had a physical disease with a name helped to put everything else into perspective. I knew that I could research hepatitis C and learn how to cope with this potentially debilitating disease. And that is what I did.

My nursing training and instincts kicked in and before long, even through two treatments (the average treatment is one year in length) plagued with many side effects, I formed a hepatitis C support/self-help group to help others infected/affected with hepatitis C, regardless of the source and to raise awareness in the Atlantic provinces.

What I have gone through goes a long way towards understanding others with any chronic illness. The emotions of the grieving process are the same as when one loses a loved one, but we are in the continual process of losing our health. Helping others gets our minds off ourselves and brings a personal satisfaction that we have made a difference in someone's life.

Yes, I have lost everything to this disease, but I also gained so much more. Material possessions do not mean the world to me anymore – they are things that can come and go. I have learned the hard way to appreciate the so-called little things in life – a sunny day, laughing with my kids, my parents' love, the peace and joy in my heart from my God, and knowing that I am making at least a small difference in this world.

My passion and perfectionism for the challenges of the operating room has been replaced by my genuine devotion to helping people in all aspects of hepatitis C. The old adage still applies – once a nurse, always a nurse. I'm just in a different field.

“One thing that I do, forgetting those things that are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead...”

Philippians 3:13

Correspondence: Debi Ripley, 53 Ackman Court, Moncton, NB, E1A 3A1, Tel: 506-858-8519