

David Wright continues his series describing his experiences of living with Hepatitis C. In this article, he explains the process of tests following the initial diagnosis.

The year was 1996 and I had been told 6 months or so before that I was Hepatitis C positive. In those days, the medical community knew very little about the virus. They did know however, that you contracted it via blood, so straight away, I.V. (Intravenous injectors) drug users were prime targets. In fact, when I found out I was positive I wrote a letter to my drug using friends in the West Midlands. They got tested and ALL tested positive.

What was this damn thing that had stormed into our lives so suddenly, yet according to the specialists, had been living in our blood, attacking our livers for 'God knows how long?'

As I said in my first article, my specialist at the Heath was the most arrogant, socially inept man I had the misfortune to cross paths with. He was obsessed with how much I drank. That was his opening line. Not, "Hello how are you?" but, "Have you had a drink since the last time I saw you?" Eyebrows raised. Talk about belittling you!

I was diagnosed with what is known as 'Chronic' Hepatitis C (which 80% of all people infected have). It basically means that it is not going away on its own, and you have had it for some time. Most people with Hep C feel fine but some, like myself, who had had it at that time for around 10 years, can find themselves feeling tired. This may range from feeling a bit tired to chronic fatigue where you are completely washed out.

You see, your liver is the battery of your body and we know this from Chinese medicine. Chinese medicine bases itself on energy paths in the body where your life force or 'Chi' flows. Chi energy is stored in the liver, so if it is fighting off a virus, it is common for you to start feeling washed out. I cannot recommend acupuncture enough and if anyone out there thinks it is a load of rubbish answer me this, 'How can the Chinese perform major operations using just acupuncture and no anaesthetic?'

Well back to conventional medicine.

After it is determined that you have chronic Hepatitis C you will first undergo an Ultrasound scan of your liver and surrounding area. Those of you ladies who have had babies will be familiar with this process. You lie in a darkened

room and have some lubricant squirted onto your belly (which is the worst bit because it is cold!). Then the person operating the scan machine places an oblong sensor onto your belly and moves it to your liver area. They need to press firmly so they can get a good picture of your liver. The object of this exercise is to see if your liver is swollen or if there are any abnormalities. This is very rare.

The next step is a liver biopsy. This gives the specialists the clearest information on how your liver is shaping up. I had one about 10 years ago and there is nothing to it. You generally go into hospital the night before and the next day they perform the procedure. You have to lie on your left hand side when the biopsy is about to take place. They then insert a special long thin needle with a tiny tool on the end into your abdomen that scrapes a tiny bit of liver tissue for the consultants to examine. The only pain I felt was, for some strange reason, in my right shoulder. It was more like an ache, but bearable - and you are talking to someone who has no pain tolerance. They then check your blood pressure every 15 minutes to ensure there is no internal bleeding. This is very, very rare but they have to make sure. After about two hours you can sit up and before you know it you're on your way home.

I found the worst bit was waiting for the results - as with any test I guess. They found that my liver had mild damage, which I must say was a pleasant surprise as I have drunk a lot of alcohol in my life. That was ten years ago and I am due for another biopsy after Christmas.

Your liver is a strong organ and can repair itself so long as you do not go past 'the point of no return' - cirrhosis. Milk Thistle, which you can get from Holland and Barrett works wonders for me, as well as vitamin B supplements as they are good for your memory amongst other things.

In part three, I will give you information on the best way to go about day to day living with Hep C and I will tell you how the virus has progressed for me, over the last ten years. But, remember that it is a slow acting virus so try not to worry too much. A lot of people go through their lives not realising they have the virus!

Until the next time, try not to get too drunk over Christmas. I make a rule, wine on Christmas day and canned beer on Boxing Day. Then back to my Camomile and Peppermint tea - and no Spirits! Or else you'll end up one!

Only joking, bye for now.

David Wright