

David Wright will be writing a series of articles, charting his experiences of living with Hepatitis C. The first in the series, David describes the events leading up to him discovering he has the condition.

"Hepatitis what?"

Apart from my love affair with opiates, I had another chemical I loved equally: alcohol. This was a very dangerous love affair because if you take heroin when you're drunk, your chances of overdosing are much higher. I coped by living a double life: one was Dave the piss head who worked at the Tavern, and the other was Dave the junkie who would disappear from the pub scene and join up with his soul mate to live the life of a heroin addict

Let's go back to 1987, when I was on a 'government scheme' working with a team of other long-term unemployed. I was in my 'drinking-myself-stupid' days so when I kept falling asleep in the van, I put it down to being a piss head. 1989 was probably one of my most drug-free years, as I was in love. The trouble was that she loved her drink as much as me, so my drinking was at an all time high. I did however manage to hold a job down in a carpet factory but my hardest task was trying to stay awake. Again I put it down to the booze.

In 1994, the hospital told me that I could not keep going in for detoxifications from booze and opiates; I needed to follow it up with rehab. I jumped at the chance; I was tired of the life and wanted to change. My drugs worker went to offer me a list of about 12 rehabs but being into fate, I just picked one said, "There".

'There' happened to be a rehab in Newport called Ty Palmyra. So in April 1994 my social worker drove me and my 70s radiogram, my albums and tapes to this rehab in Newport. After going through the shock period of having no drink/drugs (which lasted about a month), then pining for the outside world which took up the second month, my head started to slowly get together around the third month. We ate wonderful home cooked food and when my mum came to see me, four months after I entered, she was nearly crying because I looked and felt so well, Apart from one thing...

We were up at 08.00 am to report to the office and then we did our morning jobs (mine was mopping and polishing the stairs and banisters). We had breakfast and then had group from 10.00am until noon. I found this fine. However, in the afternoon group between 2.00pm and 4.00 pm, I really had to fight to stay awake; I felt so tired. I felt myself nodding off which was awful when someone was pouring out their heart and soul. After the group, I literally crawled up the stairs to my room and would fall into a deep sleep for an hour or so. I would feel much better then.

Soon, the staff began to notice and I was told to see the doctor, who gave me a blood test. I returned a week later and as the doctor looked at my results he noticed that my liver count was still raised. This would have been the case if I was drinking every day, but he knew I had been abstinate from drink/drugs for five months. Now a good G.P should have thought, 'There is something wrong here his liver results should have returned normal, lets do more tests', but all he said to me (as I was leaving) was that if I went back to my previous lifestyle, I would die. I could have told him that.

Eventually, I left the rehab to start my new life in the lovely city of Worcester; however, my bouts of tiredness remained unsolved. Worcester was a disaster; I did not know anyone and I found myself living on a rough estate where people shouted at each other to communicate. Also, I was only a 30 minute train journey away from my old heroin associates in Kidderminster. I spent day after day waiting until 6.00 pm, when I would venture out to the off license to buy my four cans of super strength cider. Between 7.00 pm and 11.00 pm when I would drink my cider was the only time I felt slight enjoyment in this new life.

Loneliness eats away at your soul so after a few months I started to board the train to see my old mates in Kidderminster and I fell back into the life of a heroin addict. I fitted in right away because in the outside world, that was all I knew. I sold everything in my flat to buy smack, which happened to be £800 worth of stuff social services bought me to start my new life. However, this time was different; I was soon unhappy with my heroin life. I went back on the methadone a few times but continued to use on top of it. Soon enough, I rang the rehab and asked them if they could help me.

It turned out that they could, and in January 1996 I moved into 'Janner House' in Cardiff. My mate was sending me little half full bottles of methadone but to my surprise I got a script from the then Cardiff Community Drugs Team (name has since changed) straight away. I met with the doctor and she mentioned something about a blood test, but I was only half listening as I was overwhelmed by relief about getting a methadone script.

I went to the blood nurse and had blood taken. On the way out, I remember her saying, 'We test for Hepatitis C now'. I thought nothing of it, as I had always tested negative for everything in the past. My suspicions were aroused when I phoned them up about a week later to ask them something about my script. The receptionist said, "David, the doctor needs to see you ASAP". "What for?" was my reply. "I can't tell you over the phone, the doctor has to see you in person," came the formal reply. My head went into panic mode; 'Are they going to stop my script?'; 'Why should they, I haven't done any gear...'

I got to the CDT and was given a cup of tea! My head was all over the place but the blood test was the furthest from my mind. After what seemed like an eternity (which was in fact probably 10 minutes) I was summoned by a sorrowful looking receptionist to go into the doctor's office. I opened the door and there was a sorrowful looking doctor who motioned me to sit down. On the table was my file, opened at a specific page. As I sat down the doctor told me that they had the results from my blood test. She did not say another word but simply pointed at something in my file. There is was in black and white: Hepatitis C POSITIVE.

My mind seemed to fall apart and back together again, spinning with a thousand questions; disbelief and confusion. All I managed to stammer was, "What the fuck is it?" A question the doctor seemed to have heard many times; she gave me a sheet of A4 paper with writing on one side and then went into a well researched speech. I tried to follow it but it is hard to take in that kind of information when you are in shock. That's why I advocate for tapes or CD ROMs, to be handed out that explain about the virus. That way you can listen to it at your leisure and also play it to your loved ones, because it is hard to explain the details to them when you have only heard it once and were in shock at the time.

I managed to process enough information from the doctor and the information sheet to understand that: I had a slow acting virus; the main symptoms was fatigue, depression and memory loss (sometimes referred as 'Brain Fog'); that for some people it goes away on it's own; or if I was really lucky I might have had a false positive and therefore, did not have the virus. I was warned though that this was a long shot. The doctor also told me that some people can live their lives without realising they have it and some do not feel any symptoms until they've had the virus for years and years.

I was then told that she was writing to a 'specialist' at a hospital in Cardiff and he would be able to tell me more. I was also told briefly told that it was best if I did not drink; I should use a condom if I was having sexual intercourse, even though there was only as small risk of passing it on sexually, as it was a blood to blood virus; and I was warned that it could lead to cirrhosis of the liver, or in rare cases, liver cancer.

When I saw the specialist he turned out to be one of the most unpleasant men I have ever met. He did not seem to understand that I was suffering from alcohol and drug addiction. He could not, or would not, comprehend that telling me to stop drinking was like telling Richard Branson to keep his feet on the ground.

So my new life in Wales had not gone as planned. The good news was that I had a methadone script and was not doing any gear; and I was selling the Big Issue in Newport. The bad news was that I was in the pub everyday and had to go for a liver Biopsy.

More to come about life changing decisions and learning the Hep C ropes, in my next article.