

FIFTY YEARS WITH DIABETES

and still looking on the bright side

Stan Moroney tells
Deborah Condon about
living with diabetes

Being diagnosed with diabetes in your teens can be an overwhelming thing at the best of times. But imagine being diagnosed in your teens at a time when little was known about the condition and you had never even heard of it.

This is the situation in which Stan Moroney found himself in 1958, when he was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at the age of just 17.

Now aged 68, Stan from Co Clare, was diagnosed with diabetes in February 1958. However, he suspects he had the condition for some time before that as in the months prior to his diagnosis, he was very unwell.

"I just always remember the thirst. I felt so dehydrated all the time and couldn't get enough fluids into me. I felt sick and I lost two stone in weight. That was a terrible Christmas for me. I eventually went to a local GP and he knew immediately it was diabetes but I had never even heard of it before," he explains.

Stan was admitted to hospital where he was to spend the next two months, while doctors attempted to stabilise him. He says he knew the condition was serious but knew little beyond that.

"I remember being injected with insulin and the doctor walked in and said 'you'll be on those for life'. That was my first shock," he says.

And injections were very different then compared to now.

"The syringes were big, glass instruments. The needles on them were very big and I was so thin, they hurt like crazy. And in those days, there were no disposable syringes. You were given these glass syringes that you had to sterilise by boiling in water. They could break easily in the water," Stan explains.

At that time, diabetes medication and equipment was not free of charge the way it is now, so Stan had to pay for all of this. In the late 1960s, diabetes was included in the Long

Term Illness Scheme, making medication and equipment free to anyone affected, irrespective of income.

Stan faced an uphill battle with his diabetes over the next few years. With little or no information on how to control the condition, he struggled to maintain healthy blood sugar levels and admits that in the 1960s, he even fell into a few diabetic comas.

"I was sent to a specialist in Limerick and he couldn't control it and eventually I was sent to a specialist in the Mater Hospital in Dublin and this was the first time since I was diagnosed that I felt good again," he says.

It was at the Mater that he met a dietitian for the first time – 16 years after his initial diagnosis.

"The truth is before that, I knew nothing about how to take insulin properly or about the importance of diet. I just took the same amount of insulin at the same time every day, not realising that you have to alter it depending on the situation. And I ate whatever I wanted. The only thing I had been told to avoid before that was sugar!" he explains.

Stan also points out that it was not possible to monitor your own blood sugar levels back then the way it is now.

"Being able to monitor myself and the introduction of disposable syringes changed my life," he happily admits.

Stan travelled up and down to the Mater in Dublin once or twice a year until the 1980s when he was referred to a specialist in Limerick Regional Hospital, which he attends to this day.

He now has much better control of the condition and counts himself lucky that he has suffered no serious complications considering the rocky years he had.

He worked with Shannon Airport for 30 years and was always very upfront with them about his diabetes. However, he admits that while working as a builder many years ago,

LIFE STORY



When Stan Moroney was diagnosed with diabetes in 1958, there were no disposable syringes or practical pens around. Picture by Declan Monaghan, *The Clare Champion*

he told absolutely nobody, despite the work being very physical, a factor which could have had a serious effect on his condition at the time.

Married since the 1960s, he also admits that his wife was 'very worried' about his diabetes because before they were even married, she had seen him going into a diabetic coma. But, he adds, "she has always looked after me".

Stan has two daughters and three grandchildren and so far, none has developed diabetes. However, he believes it can run in families, as a number of his relatives have been diagnosed over the years.

This is a far cry from the days back in 1958 when he was diagnosed.

"For that two months that I was in hospital, there was not one other person in the hospital with diabetes. There were a lot of elderly patients and when they heard I had diabetes they would come to me and tell me my teeth were going to fall out and I was going to go blind as a result. I thought I had no future back then," he says.

However, just last year, Stan had an eye check-up and his eyes were in such good condition, the specialist could not believe that he even had diabetes.

Stan believes that one of the best things

about diabetes care today compared to 50 years ago, is the vast amount of information available.

"There was simply no information available then. That is why I am so happy for young people who are diagnosed today because they are given so much information and it is improving all the time," he says.

Stan is well known in his area, so on a number of occasions, when a child or young person has been diagnosed with diabetes, their parents have brought them to see him and show them that it is possible to live a long and fulfilled life with diabetes.

"I tell the children to do what the doctor tells them and to learn as much as possible, as you can never know enough about diabetes. I also tell them the importance of eating a healthy diet," he says.

When it comes to his own diet, he again acknowledges the excellent support of his wife.

"She makes sure I eat right," he simply says.

Back in the early 1960s, Stan joined the Diabetes Federation in the UK as there was nothing similar here. The Diabetes Federation of Ireland was not established until 1967. He was not really involved with this as he travelled a lot with his job.

However, a year ago, he became heavily involved with the Federation, when a new branch was founded in Clare. Having heard about Stan, the Federation got in contact with him and asked him to become involved.

"Even though I am now retired, I am a member of the branch's committee and that keeps me very busy. We held a sponsored walk recently and raised funds for the Federation and are hoping to hold another one soon," he says.

When speaking to Stan, his optimism and positive outlook shine through. Rather than focusing on the difficult years he had following his diagnosis of diabetes, he is simply full of praise for the various hospitals and medical professionals he has attended.

"I have been so lucky and I would like to say thank you to all the doctors I have seen. In all of the hospital visits I have had and all of the doctors I have seen, I never had one bad story about any of them," he says.

In this day and age, with increasing reports about unhappiness with our health system, Stan's story is a refreshing change.