

A lifetime with Type 1

Deborah Condon talks to Michael Kenny about 'huge' needles, boiling syringes and how far diabetes care has come in the 62 years since his diagnosis

When it comes to Type 1 diabetes, Michael Kenny has seen it all. He has been living with the condition for 62 years and remembers a time of 'huge' needles, glass syringes and insulin that, unlike now, had to be paid for.

Now aged 76 and a father of three, Mr Kenny, from Galway, developed Type 1 diabetes at the age of 14. He recalls experiencing some of the familiar symptoms of the condition, such as extreme thirst and weight loss.

He was brought to his GP who, following a urine test, sent him straight to hospital, where he spent the next eight weeks.

"My family and I knew nothing about diabetes and nobody would tell you anything in those days. I thought I would just be let out of hospital and would be fine," he says.

At that time, patient education was not at the forefront in the way it is now, so Mr Kenny was in for a big shock on his last day in hospital.

"The nurse came in and said, 'I will show you how to do it' and I said, 'do what?' She said 'inject yourself, you have to do this every day for the rest of your life now'. I couldn't believe it. It was then that I realised this was a lifelong condition," he explains.

He recalls that the needles were huge and in fact, he had never even seen a real one before being in hospital.

Information gaps

He was sent home with directions to take a specific type of insulin every day. However, as with the hospital, he



Michael Kenny: "I would say to anyone who has been diagnosed, it is important to keep an eye on it, but try not to let it worry you"

received no information about this insulin, it was just the standard type recommended to all people with Type 1 diabetes.

"I would have absolutely no energy all day, but then I would have loads of energy at night. There was no Irish literature about this insulin. However a neighbour of ours had been working as a nurse in the UK and she got me some literature and it was then that I found out that this type of insulin did not work until 10 or 11 hours after you took it. This is why I had no energy all day, but loads at night," Mr Kenny recalls.

Making do

Changing insulin was not an option back then – you simply had to take whatever you were told to. However after two years, his body started rejecting it and he was switched to a soluble insulin, which he had to take every morning and

evening. This made a major difference, he says.

Administering insulin was also very different back then. Aside from the big needles, he had to use glass syringes that had to be boiled clean after each use.

"It was never explained to us how to clean the syringe properly. It is supposed to be taken apart and boiled, but my mother did not know this and wouldn't take it apart, so it would end up cracking and I'd need a new one. Eventually the chemist explained how it should be done," he recalls.

Life-changing

At that time, insulin was not free for people with Type 1 diabetes in Ireland. When he was 17, Mr Kenny went to work in London. When he arrived he went to a chemist to buy his insulin.

"The pharmacist explained that I had to register with a GP and get a prescription, but that the insulin would then be free. I couldn't believe it as I had always paid for it in Ireland," he notes.

He stayed in London for 20 years where he became a member of the British Diabetic Association (now Diabetes UK). He eventually moved back home where he joined Diabetes Ireland. He currently attends a diabetes clinic in Galway once a year.

"I have been lucky with my diabetes and I would say to anyone who has been diagnosed, it is important to keep an eye on it, but try not to let it worry you. The care is much better now, insulin is much better, and thankfully, the needles are smaller!"