

A miracle diagnosis

Carol Jackson told DAPHNE OLIVIER how a Pietermaritzburg doctor's diagnosis of Rickettsia ended a 32-year nightmare of illness

THERE had been warnings - difficulty in climbing steps and unusual tiredness - but it wasn't until I woke up one morning in 1974 and found myself so weak that I could hardly get out of bed, that I realised something was very seriously wrong with my health.

As we were living in Zambia at the time, the first doctor I turned to for help was an orthopaedic surgeon in Lusaka. After a series of tests he referred me to a neurologist in Johannesburg, where I underwent more tests, including a myelogram. This revealed a crumbled spinal disc and I subsequently underwent laminectomy to remove the disc.

I was hopeful that this operation would sort out my problem, so imagine my bitter disappointment when I found that my symptoms did not go away. I recovered from the operation but still felt extremely weak, and walking even a short distance became more and more difficult.

To make matters worse, I was unable to concentrate and the trembling in my hands made it impossible to write. My joints ached. There were times when my voice failed and I was unable to speak. I was a wreck. It was no wonder I began to feel depressed.

From then on things seemed to spiral out of control. Walking on crutches, I went from a neurologist to a physician to a physiotherapist and back to yet another neurologist who sent me for another battery of tests, including yet another myelogram. The results were all negative.

My darkest moment came when a physician told me that the problem was all in my head and that there was nothing physically wrong with me. I knew beyond doubt that my symptoms were not imaginary, but this was perhaps my first real taste of depression.

Desperation sent me to a neurologist in Durban who told me that I was possibly suffering from multiple sclerosis.

In 1984 I travelled to the UK and was admitted into a hospital in Scotland, where I underwent extensive tests including lumbar puncture and a CAT scan. The end report stated that I probably had multiple sclerosis, but that myasthenia gravis (an extreme and progressive form of muscle weakness) could not be ruled out.

I returned to South Africa convinced I had done everything in my power to find the cause of my illness, but I was more depressed than ever.

The disease was taking its toll, not only on my health, but in other ways too.

My life changed completely. From being an independent, energetic, active woman, holding down a job, running a home and caring for a husband and children, I became a semi-invalid, dependent on others for help. I found this very difficult to bear. The medical bills were exorbitant and it was not long before I needed a battery-operated scooter to get around.

As time passed I adapted as best I could. My GP prescribed prednisone (a cortisone-based drug) which seemed to help for a while, but side effects forced me to stop after seven or eight years. When the depression became severe I resorted to anti-depressants, but the effects were always only temporary.

In 1996 I was told that I was suffering from an overgrowth of *Candida albicans* and my symptoms were chronic fatigue, foggy brain, and deterioration in concentration and digestive problems. I was prescribed several medications; these certainly did help but never cured the symptoms associated with *Candida* overgrowth.



What is Rickettsia?

It is a disease caused by a group of micro-organisms intermediate between bacteria and viruses. Various species are parasitic in fleas, mites, lice and ticks, as well as other insects that infest animals such as rodents. Among the disorders caused by rickettsia are diseases such as typhus, Q-fever, Rocky Mountain spotted fever and tick-bite fever. Rickettsial diseases may be acute or progressive.

ABOVE: Carol Jackson rarely uses her electric scooter anymore, which she had previously relied on for over 12 years after being dependent on a wheelchair and crutches.

I also followed a rigid diet of no sugar, yeast, refined flour, various sugary fruits, dairy products, and quite a lot of other foodstuffs.

I now understand that *Candida* was probably not the primary problem but a secondary to something else.

Then, in May 2006 (32 years after the onset of my illness), I managed to get an appointment to see Dr Cecile Jadin in Pietermaritzburg. After my consultation several blood samples were sent for analysis. The results showed rickettsiosis - Grivet's method indicated that three strains of rickettsia were positive.

I had never heard of rickettsia, but on reading up about it, discovered that it is a disease caused by a group of micro-organisms intermediate between bacteria and viruses. Various species are parasitic in fleas, mites, lice and ticks, as well as other insects that infest animals such as rodents.

Among the disorders caused by rickettsia are diseases such as typhus, Q-fever, Rocky Mountain spotted fever and tick-bite fever. Rickettsial diseases may be acute or progressive. I was found to be suffering from the latter type.

As I had spent a great deal of time in the bush in Zambia, it became obvious that I was where I had been infected, all those years ago.

In June I started a programme of tetracycline combinations for seven days at intervals of four weeks until infections cleared and were negative. Monthly examinations determined the duration of the treatment. At first this made me feel worse; but little by little, as the months went by, I began to feel cautiously optimistic. I began to walk - short distances at first, then gradually increasing.

After five months of treatment I was definitely stronger and able to enjoy a short hike - something I had never dared hope to achieve. I now regularly walk over a kilometre each morning.

And then, one morning, six months after the start of treatment, I woke up feeling as though I was alive again - I almost sprang out of bed. The change was dramatic. And quite unbelievable! Climbing stairs had been a nightmare and now I was able to go up and down as often as I pleased. No more walkers or motorised wheelchairs and scooters - no more limbs.

As I think back about how my life was affected by my illness, I am struck not only at my friends but at the emotional and physical toll on my relationship with my family had deteriorated; financially I had spent an enormous amount on consultations, diagnostic tests, health supplements which I would improve my health; and personally I had lost so much confidence in myself.

Dr Jadin continues to monitor my progress. It will be a while before I am completely well, but after so many years of ill-health, my recovery has been a real - seems like a miracle.

I am so grateful to Dr Jadin, who gave me time and made for me these years I've wasted and saved me from more invalidism, and to all those who have suffered, those who may yet be diagnosed correctly, who will be treated for a rickettsial disease, and who will never know what it was like to feel well again.