

Living Life with Diabetes

John Keeler

Edited by Barbara Millar



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Telephone (+44) 1243 779777

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To everyone with diabetes, everywhere



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About the author

Born in Dublin in 1970, John Keeler was diagnosed with diabetes on 15 May 1975.

He went to the BDA's (British Diabetes Association, now Diabetes UK) Youth Diabetic Weekend in 1996, and since then he became more involved with people with diabetes. He has facilitated many small groups both in Ireland and England, has been involved in the setting up of Ireland's young person's groups, counselled people with the condition, and has been a voluntary leader on many children's and teenager's diabetic camps.

John edited *Identity* (the magazine of the DFI [Diabetes Federation of Ireland]), now called *Diabetes Ireland*, from 2000 to 2001, and in 2001 he had an article published about his exploits at the European Masters Swimming Championships that year in Majorca, Spain, where he competed, published in *Diabetes Voice*, the magazine of the International Diabetes Federation (which is published in English, French and Spanish), where he competed.

In addition, he was a member of the record-breaking 'Four Peaks Challenge' team in 1997, has competed at the Irish judo championships, as well as many international club swim meets/galas. John has, at various times, played soccer, Gaelic football, judo, qualified as a lifeguard, taught children how to swim,

completed a distance-learning course in social sciences, gained a qualification in counselling, and plans to go into counselling/psychology professionally, to work especially with people with diabetes.



Foreword

Diabetes mellitus is a growing problem. In the UK alone, 1.4 million people have diabetes and this figure is projected to grow to around 3 million by 2010.

This is the story of one person's life with Type 1 diabetes. John Keeler was diagnosed with the condition at the tender age of four years. He has no memory of life before diabetes. This book is his journey from that initial diagnosis through dealing with pain, fear and ignorance to his situation today, where he feels in control of his diabetes, rather than the condition controlling his life.

John is candid about the mistakes he has made along this journey. He is also forthright about where he feels he was failed by health care professionals, by work colleagues and by friends.

But this is not a self-pitying tale of adversity. Far from it. In describing his life with diabetes, John will inspire those with the condition to consider new challenges, and will inform those who do not have diabetes that a person with Type 1 diabetes is just like anyone else – they just happen to need insulin.

Understanding diabetes

Diabetes mellitus is a condition in which the amount of glucose (sugar) in the body is too high because the body cannot use it properly. Glucose comes from the digestion of starchy foods, such as bread, rice, potatoes, chapattis and yams, from sugar and sweet foods and from the liver, which makes glucose.

Insulin is a hormone produced by the pancreas which helps glucose to enter the cells, where it is used as fuel by the body. Insulin is the only hormone that can reduce blood glucose. When the insulin supply fails, the whole system goes out of balance.

Diabetes is a permanent change to a person's internal chemistry. The main symptoms of untreated diabetes are:

- increased thirst;
- going to the loo all the time, especially but not necessarily so at night;
- extreme tiredness;
- weight loss;
- genital itching or regular episodes of thrush;
- blurred vision.

The two main types of diabetes are:

- Type 1 – also known as insulin-dependent diabetes;
- Type 2 – also known as non-insulin-dependent diabetes.

John Keeler has Type 1 diabetes and this develops if the body is unable to produce any insulin. This type of diabetes usually appears before the age of 40 – John was just four years old – and is treated by insulin injections and diet. Regular exercise is also recommended.

The only way to determine whether you have diabetes is to have your doctor measure your blood sugar levels through a blood test.

It is an inescapable fact that people with diabetes have a higher chance of developing certain serious health problems including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, circulation problems, nerve damage and damage to the kidneys and eyes. The risk is particularly high for people with diabetes who are also very overweight, who smoke or who are not physically active.

You will greatly reduce your risk of developing any of these complications by controlling your blood glucose and blood pressure levels and by eating healthily and doing regular exercise.

In the last 10 to 20 years, the care for people with diabetes has improved dramatically. One of the most important developments has been improved methods of screening which will help your doctor to pick up any health problems at an early stage, so you can be treated more successfully. This is why having regular medical check-ups, at least annually, is so important.

Barbara Millar



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