



## Real stories of being diagnosed as an adult

### Malta, Iceland and too many big nights

As a 23-year-old Australian living in London, I was living the life that most other Australians did when they are here. I drank too much, went out too much, worked long hours and survived on a staple diet of vodka, coffee and Marlborough lights.

I had just come back from a holiday in Malta, and had planned a trip to Iceland with some friends. We were going to swim in the Blue Lagoon, dance all night and chase Scandinavian totty all over Reykjavik. It was all looking good, except I was feeling crap.

I had been feeling crap for weeks. I was knackered for one thing. I had never been an athlete, but now switching my computer on at work seemed to necessitate a lie down. All I wanted to do was sleep. And when I wasn't sleeping I had trouble dragging myself down to the shops to bulk buy Evian and huge amounts of food which I would then eat all myself. At the same time, I was losing weight.

Everyone blamed my tiredness and thirst on too many big nights out. My weight loss was apparently due to the excitement of too many holidays too close together and my hunger was an insufficient diet catching up with me. Therefore, with my friends, colleagues, diagnosis, and armed with my 3 favourite partners in crime, I flew to Iceland.

But in Iceland, I could barely get out of bed. I had been there before and had always loved the place, but I couldn't be bothered looking out the window to check the weather, let alone take my friends sightseeing. Still I was determined to get over 'my tiredness problem' so I dragged myself out and about with the girls. We did the sightseeing, we danced all night (admittedly I had to fight to keep my eyes open and had to elect not to speak as it made my mouth too dry) and we planned to hire a car and take a road trip along the South Coast to see the Ice lakes and Black sand beaches. On the day of our road trip, I got out of bed and promptly threw up.

I blamed the lobster soup at lunch the day before. I refused breakfast, hopped into the hire car and fell asleep.

We stopped at a waterfall and as my friends admired its beauty I slumped on the bonnet of the car and announced: "I wish I could drink the waterfall". I then fell asleep.



The rest is kind of a blur. I remember a hospital in the middle of nowhere in the Icelandic countryside. I remember a doctor asking my friends lots of questions. He asked if I had been exposed to SARS - and then I woke up in the back of an ambulance. I was being taken to Reykjavik Hospital. My Icelandic is confined to "please", "thanks" and "2 vodkas with Diet Coke" so I had no idea what was going on.

Two days later, I woke up and a doctor sitting by my bed informed me that I was an "Insulin Dependent Diabetic". "Oh is that all?" I remember thinking. "So how long will I have to take tablets to fix that," I asked. "Can I go back to work next week?"

The Doctor looked a little horrified and then proceeded to explain. I had severe ketoacidosis; I had almost died; tablets weren't quite going to cut it; and No! There would be no work next week, or the week after for that matter.

The stay in Reykjavik hospital wasn't as bad as you'd expect. Not too many Australians end up in intensive care in Iceland so I was spoilt by all the nurses and had the benefit of the odd good looking Scandinavian doctor sticking their head in to check on my progress (even if I wasn't dressed for the occasion). My friends visited bearing moisturizers and hair products to repair some of the damage dehydration had done to my body. One of the girls stayed on with me and eventually I was cleared to fly back to London. Where I am now.

My mother flew over to be with me. I took 3 weeks off work. I have stopped going out every single night and have given up the ciggies for good. I feel better than I have in years. It's six

# Fact sheet



months on now and I'm still learning. I still slip up and there are still plenty of things that I am trying to understand. But in the end, it's no big imposition on my life.

I do everything I used to do: I still travel and since being diagnosed I've been to Spain, Sweden, Amsterdam and an ill-advised weekend in Blackpool. I give diabetes the courtesy it is owed. I do everything in my power not to exacerbate it and in the end I'm left with a better life style because of it and a pretty crazy diagnosis story to tell at dinner parties.

Melanie

## I had been feeling terrible for over a week

Hot flushes, constantly thirsty and getting little sleep due to getting up 3 or 4 times a night to go to the toilet.

In typical male fashion, I chose to ignore the symptoms and avoid seeing a doctor. The crunch came when I was driving to the local football grand final. Although my vision wasn't that bad, I had trouble reading the number plates on the car in front of me.

At the game, I couldn't read the advertising signs on the opposite side of the ground. It was then that I decided I must see a doctor the next day. I continued to drink can after can of Coke that afternoon, without being able to get rid of that 'about to die of thirst' feeling. I mentioned it to a few people at the game. "You must have diabetes" they all replied jokingly.

The next day I rang the doctor and made an appointment for mid-morning. The doctor informed me that I had diabetes and that I need to report straight to hospital where the local expert GP and diabetes educator would meet me.

The first thing that sprung to mind was the needles. No one likes them, and I am no different. All I could envisage was a lifetime sentence of huge needles at every turn.

I ended up staying in the hospital for a week, and it didn't help ease my concern when a nurse administered my first needle from a classic syringe. She told me that there were 'better' needles for people with diabetes, but she wasn't allowed to use them. Still didn't help much.

A couple of days later, I gave myself my first needle. I can still remember my hand shaking so much, that it's a wonder I didn't pierce the skin in about a dozen different places. The first was the hardest.

One of my big concerns was when I learnt that although I had no history of diabetes in my family, it was in fact hereditary. I explained this to my wife, who broke down immediately. She was 4 months pregnant with our first child. There was no real way of comforting her. I didn't know whether our baby would develop diabetes, and no one could tell me for sure either way. I later learned the chance was about 7%.

I had about a day of feeling sorry for myself. I asked the doctor whether the life sentence passed to me would go away, as my eyes were already much better. Once I was told straight down the line that I had to deal with it, I just accepted it and moved on.

A few days after diagnosis, I went for a walk across from the hospital to the beach and out to the end of the pier. I was absolutely terrified that my sugar level would drop out and I would collapse. But of course, I survived.

My diabetes educator said I was a star student. She was very supportive to both my wife and I. She even took the time to contact my work colleagues and explain the condition, and what to expect from me, so that when I chose to return to work, I could return as though nothing had happened. That was great for a bloke that doesn't like to talk about such things too much.

I had the opinion that if I was going to 'get something' then it could have been much worse than diabetes. I came from a scientific background at university and work, so grasping the principles of managing diabetes was easy. I could understand the lingo the health professionals used. But I did vow that this condition wouldn't stop me from continuing to do whatever I wanted. And it hasn't.

Barry

