

A HELPING hand

Nurse Nicola had spent her life looking after other people, then a shock diagnosis turned her world upside down...



Me as a nurse with my friend Jane

DEAR LIFELINE

As I sat down on my sofa after another long shift at work, I rubbed the back of my neck and let out a long sigh.

'When will the pain stop?' I muttered to myself.

I was in agony.

Ever since my 20s, I'd suffered from chronic flare-ups in my neck. I had spasms, and was then unable to move my head.

My arms also went numb.

Every time this happened, I went to the doctor, where I was treated with a course of physiotherapy.

But a couple of months later, the pain would come back and I'd need more physio.

It was an endless cycle.

I worked as a nurse and health visitor, so was always on my feet. Taking it easy wasn't an option.

One day, I decided to ask for an MRI on my spine, where they found I had some collapsed discs.

'We need to book you in for

I also started to develop other uncomfortable sensations through my body, such as sharp, stabbing pains in my thighs.

On top of that, I had problems with my bowel and bladder. Shortly after, I went back to the hospital for another MRI scan, but they couldn't see anything out of the ordinary.

Only, during a routine check-up with my GP about my neck flare-ups, she couldn't believe how much I'd declined.

'When you go home tonight, I need you to start from your head and work your way down your body, writing down every symptom you have,' she explained.

It wasn't until I sat down that I realised how many parts of my body were in constant pain.

The next day, I went back and showed her my notes.

After she mulled over them, she turned to me with

spinal surgery,' the doctor said.

Even though I was worried, I was also relieved at the thought that I could finally be pain-free.

However, a couple of months after the operation, my symptoms returned.

'The surgery was a success, so it's odd you're still experiencing pain,' the doctor said.

a serious expression.

'I think you've got multiple sclerosis,' she said.

'That can't be right,' I said, alarmed. 'I'm a nurse and I've looked after patients with MS.'

A potentially disabling condition, it affected the brain and spinal cord — which controls everything we do. I couldn't believe I might have it.

'I need to refer you to a neurologist but unfortunately there's a six-month wait,' she said. 'If you can, I'd advise you to go private.'

After years of pain, I knew I couldn't wait any longer.

So I asked my sister Paula to help pay for private healthcare, which meant I was able to see a neurologist that week.

In his office, I waited nervously while he looked at my medical history.

'The signs do point towards multiple sclerosis, but we'll need to do an MRI and a lumbar puncture to confirm it,' he said.

He sent me home and said he

would get back in touch with my results four weeks later. When the day came, I paced anxiously around the house until the phone rang.

'Mrs Shergold?' the voice on the other end asked. 'Hello, speaking,' I replied, as I sat down at the top of the stairs. 'I have your results,' he continued. 'They show you have

multiple lesions on your brain and spine, and you've tested positive for multiple sclerosis.'

My mind whirled in shock. Part of me had still held out hope that I didn't have the condition.

My diagnosis hadn't properly sunk in, but I knew I had to tell my sons Oliver, Toby and Elliot, as well as my mum Irene and my sisters.

My youngest, Elliot, took the news the hardest.

And when I told Mum, she was devastated.

'We'll get through this,' I told her, as she sobbed in my arms.

Immediately, I started treatment and was put on a course of steroids.

However, I had a bad reaction to those and was in hospital for two weeks.

After that, I was put on a disease-modifying drug.

Unfortunately, I continued to relapse.

My symptoms worsened, and I sometimes lost power in my arms or legs.

A year after my diagnosis, I was forced to retire from nursing after 30 years.

A lot of my work revolved

'I was forced to retire'



Me



I have to use a wheelchair

around safeguarding, and as my cognitive ability and short-term memory deteriorated, I was told I could no longer work.

I was heartbroken.

Two years later, I was moved on to another medication.

But still, the relapses continued.

During this time, I suffered a severe setback which put me in hospital for three months.

Paralysed from the waist down, I spent Christmas in hospital.

And due to lockdown, my sons were unable to visit me.

When I was finally allowed to leave, I needed a lot of rehabilitation to get me up and walking with crutches again.

In the new year, I was put on a third treatment, which was like a chemotherapy drug.

However, some of the side-effects included kidney problems, and there was a 70 per cent

chance of developing cancer.

None of the treatments had worked for me, so I did my own research.

That's when I came across stem-cell transplants.

It wouldn't cure my MS, but would halt its progression — and vastly improve my health and mobility.

I had finally reached the criteria for treatment on the NHS.

However, I was first put on an NHS drug trial for 12 months — which meant that by the time that finished, I would miss the cut-off age for

treatment, which was 55.

If you had a stroke, you'd be treated swiftly to prevent disability. But with MS, it seemed to be the complete opposite.

Your condition had to worsen before you were given better treatments. But by the time someone had reached that stage, the damage would have

been done.

Then one day, things took a turn for the worse.

I collapsed and Elliot found me on the floor, slipping in and out of consciousness.

I was rushed to hospital as they thought I'd had a stroke, but I'd suffered from another MS

relapse.

Needing to do something, I began fundraising for stem-cell treatment.

But there was a hefty price tag. In the UK, it would cost £98,000.

But in Mexico, it came to just under half that, at £46,000.

Over the next few months, I did anything I could to generate cash.

I'd soon raised £8,300 through toy fundraising stalls, a ball, quiz nights, afternoon teas and raffles.

I had to step out of my comfort zone, asking people for help after I'd always been the one helping others in my job.

But people were so generous and supportive.

My local Slimming World club organised a sunrise dip

— 40 people turned up and raised £520.

Complete strangers have donated to my GoFundMe.

One woman even came up to me and handed me five £20 notes.

I was incredibly touched.

I've booked my treatment for March next year, but I

have to pay in full two months before I go.

I'm determined to meet my target so I can change my life for the better.

MS took my career, but I won't let it rob me of my future.

Nicola Shergold, 54, Colchester, Essex



With my partner Gary

TOTAL

**WHAT WE GAVE...
£300**

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