

Life never tasted so sweet

I was so proud of myself, trekking, up in Kakadu, each day I'd pull another notch in on my belt. This 14 day adventure was something else. I was drinking water by the litre, full on the hour, isn't that what they'd recommended up here? The dry season knocked the socks out of you without even realising it, dehydration could set in easy, but not for me, I was refilling my water bottle more than most. And boy I was having the best sleep ever, after 8-10 hours walking and exploring this incredible terrain; I'd fall inside my tent and be out like a light. Slept 12 hours easily every night and be buzzing in the morning ready for the day ahead. Each sleep was so deep; I couldn't remember the last time I felt so at peace.

Few weekends later, couple of weeks before I was returning back to London where I was living at the time, a few of us headed up for a weekend in the Blue Mountains. They couldn't get over it, how slim I was, the weight had poured off in such a short time. Must have been all the swimming I'd been doing down in Bronte pool as well as the 14 day trek. Couldn't take a beer anymore! One small schooner and I was fast asleep, 4pm in the afternoon; I slept through most of that weekend. On the flight back to London, sad to say goodbye to family, friends, and equally excited about reconnecting with my partner after five months away. Looking in the mirror in the toilet cubicle on the plane, I couldn't believe what I saw.

My tongue was green. A thick layer of green grime coated my precious tongue! Five minutes of my toothbrush scaling away, only made it go from dark green to lime. Oh what a romantic reunion this was gonna be!

Arriving in London, a quick change into my new black leather skirt I'd found in a second-hand shop in Sydney just before I left. Couldn't believe I squeezed into it. Standing at Heathrow it was already loose. I saw him standing there, shyly; a look of concern crossed his face. I wanted to run over and jump in his arms like the character from 'Love Actually' in her bright red coat. Then I remembered he'd be horrified, a cool London Jamaican he abhorred public demonstrations of all types. Picked a gem with me then!

Our great reunion: he was concerned- I looked poorly. I was argumentative - I looked hot! He just didn't like the new slim me. Wasn't that, he persisted; he was worried, I looked sick. The passionate long awaited reunion of our imagination vanished, turning into grumblings and angry shouting from me. I couldn't believe this is what I came back for. Too tired to do anything I retired to our bed, slept like a log, nearly 15 hours straight. The next day was better, he'd taken annual leave, we got a last minute deal and we were on our way to Crete. Seven days- our holiday went awry with my lethargy and mood swings. He couldn't believe the woman who'd returned, she'd grown from feisty to irreconcilable.

Once back in London, it seemed such a mess, I moved out for a while to my best friend's nest. One night about 3am, I woke up. In a surreal haze, I landed in the kitchen, searching for the sweetest treats I could find. Downing coke, devouring sweets I couldn't believe the urgency. I wasn't eating in a sorrow haze but in an animal, instinctual, survival way.

Next day I booked in to the doctors. Not even sure why. May have been the comments, friends had commented too; I looked strained. I was having cravings at odd times, day and night: devouring whole bags of grapes, drinking Bundaberg rum and then running to the shop to buy chocolate coated ice-creams. My friends knew I was upset, the fights with my man so soon on returning back from Sydney, but this was a little crazy even by my standards.

The nurse at the doctors did a urine test. She broke the news well. 'We'll need to do a blood test, your urine sample shows a positive reading for Diabetes.'

'You're sure?' I said. 'Couldn't it be the jelly babies I ate last night?'

'No, you've definitely got diabetes, probably type 1. Your blood test shows your sugar levels are off the Richter scale at 31, ketosis could be kicking in'. I'd have to go to the hospital, next neighbourhood on.

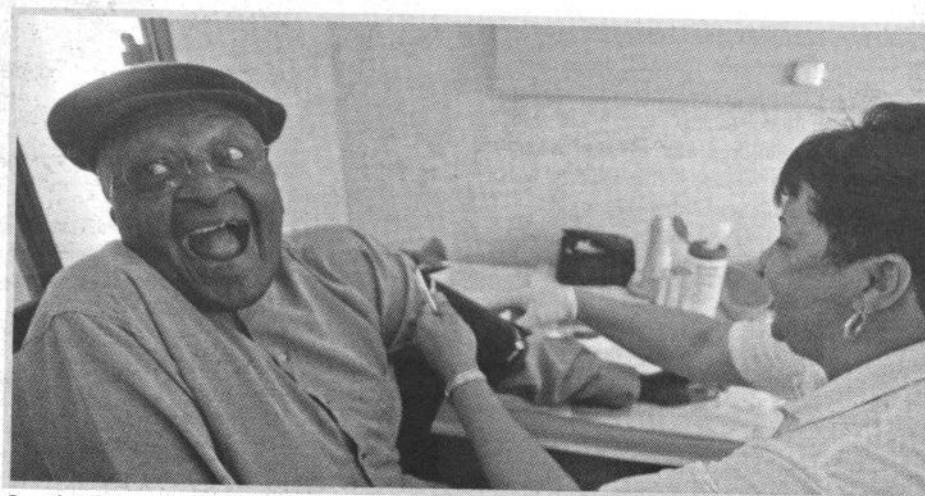
'I know the one' I said, 'I'll just jump in my car and be there in fifteen.'

'No you won't!' she exclaimed, 'By rights you should be in a coma! Call a friend to meet you there and get a taxi.' It still didn't sink in, but a part of me knew it made sense. I'd had so many of the symptoms: excessive thirst, mood swings, sugar cravings, thrush, and weight loss. At least I now knew where the green tongue on the plane had come from- I wasn't turning into some amphibian.

The specialist nurse at the Diabetes Clinic was incredible. She talked me through all the procedures and how to use the novo pen. Already with insulin in my body I was feeling more normal.

Guest Columnist

Rebecca Harcourt
Indigenous Program
Coordinator
Australian School of Business
University of New South Wales



South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu receiving a diabetes check. Diabetes and its related health conditions are rife in Australian Indigenous communities.

Injecting almost felt familiar. I had a strong sense of déjà vu as if somewhere deep inside of me I had always known, this was going to happen in my journey of life. It had just been a matter of when.

I kept thinking: at least I'm in my early 30's, not a young kid or teenager who has to manage this merry-go-round of insulin, testing BSLs, changing your diet, waiting 30 minutes before each meal you eat for the insulin to kick in, regular routines- no room for mucking up too badly.

At least my hormones weren't playing up with this whole new balance thing.

The BSL kit was definitely 'cool' almost like a mobile phone. I lapped up the red and silver novo pens, showing off their cases to friends. Humour and acceptance kicked in during those first few days of shock. I kept remembering the words the nurse had said- it's a big change but you'll go alright, and it's important to treat yourself from time to time, take each step at a time, and we'll see you in a few days to see how you're going, how your body responds, we'll have results of your blood tests.

So not a hospital bed in sight, I was able to go home with my friend that afternoon. She seemed more nervous than me. She kept asking me if I felt okay and would I be alright. Bravado kicked in- Of course I'd be fine. I felt such relief too- the last few weeks had had an added layer that had created a lot of confusion in my life, my diagnosis shed light on why. The strange mood swings, aggression, cravings, disorientations, the disappointments, the tears were implicitly affected by this new diagnosis. A calmer time lay ahead, more reminiscent of the extraordinary happiness and peace I had found in my journey back home.

It wasn't all new, this diabetes thing. My dad had been diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at 61. We both were kind of champions, somehow having postponed juvenile diabetes to a much later age. Having been around Dad, meant I knew a fair bit about the routine- the daily injections, the BSL checks, the shifts in behaviour. Dad a 5km daily runner from aged 15 to late 50's, way before running was fashionable, an Aussie rules footy player till 47, cricket player still. We knew this diagnosis was going to be a genetic one.

My Mum had a theory, one that makes a lot of sense to me. Dad and I'd both been hectic, had a lot of stress and loss in each of our lives, and once we'd slowed down, looked after ourselves the pancreas kicked in and type 1 diabetes came out.

Three months in, I was lucky, I had had time to adjust, a short family holiday with my parents, my sister, my nieces. I had time out, to laugh and be looked after. Mum gave me a great book that I read voraciously from cover to cover. An athlete shared her story of being diagnosed and now living with diabetes. She poured out her emotions, the frustrations, the highs and the lows. She made it more immediate. It slowly sunk in- this wasn't a one off drama, something for these summer months but a life- long condition.

When the first quarter blood results came in, the diabetic nurse couldn't believe her eyes, we'll post this up on the wall, your Haemoglobin A1C reading is 5.6!

I was so happy, I'd taken my time, adjusted, taken care of myself -my reading reflected this lifestyle.

The nurse warned me: the body can have a hiatus, a honeymoon period, as the insulin it'd been seeking kicks in, your body is so grateful for the revival, it can mimic a functioning pancreas. My honeymoon lasted longer than some, I teased my Dad, his BSL were rollicking all over the place, I couldn't see the fuss, I felt I had it all in hand.

Then the truth comes out, a year down the track, months back at work, in the thick of London life, the diabetes wasn't quite responding as a quiet little mouse. Adjustments had to be made, BSLs started to swivel, Dad and I had much we could cajole about. We knew from the inside, the bugger of this thing, we'd

joke, feel constrained and get on with it as best we could. The near hypos, though frightening, we could still delight in the purest taste of joy as honey melted on the tongue. Others could never realise the treat of sugar, feeling so alive, all consuming as your body recovers from the fright.

My cousin's wife, gorgeous woman in her own right, sent us each over one of her books- Traffic Lights- she'd collaborated on as a Diabetes Dietician. Now living back in Sydney, whenever we visit her home, the joy is in finding out which new treats we can eat. For sure if she serves us something, we know it's had the diabetes seal of approval. Dad still can't believe it, as she teaches us about the then new GI - you sure Kerryn? He'll ask as we tuck into some low fat ice-cream, its blue GI symbol on the side of the tub. Never one to let a good thing go, I lap it up, I make sure it's on my shopping list next time I go out.

Its eleven years on from my original diagnosis. It's still here, hasn't gone away and I've lived with it as a friend, foe and reality. I've ventured out even more once I got a grip on it, listened to what it's telling me- who I am, what I can do, where and how much risk I can take. I know to rest, exercise, have fun, build in

time and space for me.

I've travelled further afield than ever before, taken bigger risks, lived life to the full and tried not to admonish too much the helpful ones that carefully place your months of insulin in their freezer having misunderstood your requirements.

Never though, have I risked ensuring I stick to some key ways- carrying all the insulin I need plus more, injecting regularly, experimenting with the amounts of insulin depending on my daily activity. Checking my BGL readings, 5 times a day, often more, carrying snacks on my person, jelly beans or a fizzy sugar drink, wearing my medic alert bracelet, telling all that are with me, what happens, what I might need, having fun and not disguising my diabetes.

The years before my diagnosis, I'd pushed and pushed myself in so many ways, in work, in life. Those few months back home in Australia; I'd slowed down and looked after myself. My body knew me well and thought:

"Hey, what's going to keep you in check when you go back to full working life? Who's going to take responsibility of you - yourself? I know you think you can, but will you really? Won't you always be striving for the next project, the next phase? Running round catching up with everyone? Perhaps we'll give you a hint, a daily starter, so you have to pace yourself better." In a sense this is what diabetes does for me, high BGLs come up, they bug me enormously. I also know they are there to remind me- to slow down, pace myself, breathe in, provide time for each thing, don't rush ahead, be present, live in the moment.

And of course in many ways I still live a little like before. It's in my character. It's what brings me joy in life- to be involved in many things, being with friends, family and many different people from all strands of life, motivating each other and contributing new things so that life shifts in positive ways for more than just the one.

And the diabetes reminds me to reach out, get support. I don't have to do it all by myself alone. I know it triggers and makes my immune system less strong and I continue to find positive ways to ensure I don't get complications later on. There's a lot of knowledge and support out there, we're lucky -it's not a death sentence anymore.

I see my life with diabetes as having my own personal barometer, one I can't ignore.

In the last 11 years, since my original diagnosis, I've really changed my tracks, my journey, my life is much better now. I've found a new way of living and being. The diabetes has been a factor that has shifted me and supported me to find a better way of living. I might well have found this without it, who knows, it's here now. I haven't cracked the perfect formula for maintaining that perfect 5.6 anymore and I know I'm not invincible, just human- so I relish all that life brings me and reach out for more.