

PAIN – or To Krakow for a new Hip!

Such a small four-letter word but if **PAIN** is with you, it is all consuming, never leaves you and your whole existence whilst you are awake is trying to deal with it. Not only does it take over *your* entire life but also that of your nearest and dearest. I have spent literally hours crying in agony and frustration saying, over and over again, "Please, please take it away". Your face becomes a mask, grey, old looking. When I have been screaming, literally, during the early hours of the morning and been aware of my husband standing in bewilderment in the doorway, saying, "What can I do?" and me answering, "Please, please move me" and when he has come towards me changing it to, "Please don't touch me", then you know that life really isn't worth living. But if you are without Pain, you don't even think about it, it is not part of your vocabulary.

So, how do you get from one state to the other? I have Rheumatoid Arthritis that I know will be with me for the rest of my life. I have a wonderful supportive GP, an equally good Specialist and his Specialist Nurse, all part of South Devon Health Care and between them all, I now seem to have the medication required to make life bearable. That process has been quite a long one, including three different types of Disease Modifying Drugs tried over quite a long period and two different Anti-Inflammatory's. The Steroids prescribed have varied from a very high dosage during "flare-ups" to the present one which is very low and hopefully, soon, I will have weaned myself off them completely (finger's tightly crossed). So, what about this **PAIN** that persisted for so long, where does that come into the picture? That was caused by the rapid deterioration of my joint in my right hip and boy, looking back, about 50% of my day was spent in tears and frustration. The pain catches you suddenly and you just have to sit down, trying to find a comfortable position to ease it. Twice this happened during shopping, my husband, having gone into another shop while I went into the butchers, and before he had caught up with me to take me back to the car, I had this excruciating pain which had me in floods of tears causing me much humiliation.

A long awaited visit to the Specialist in January had confirmed that I badly needed a total right hip

replacement and the bad news was that it would be nine months before I could have the operation on the National Health Service. As the condition worsened weekly, I knew that to keep my sanity (and my husband's) I would have to "go private". We had grown up knowing that one should "Save for a rainy day" and I knew that my "rainy day" had now come. My husband did most of the research, starting locally, and the cost varied considerably but all the hospitals seemed to discharge the patient after 8-10 days and I assume, expected them to then do their own exercises and arrange for some sort of physiotherapy. So he investigated further, and thanks to Saga magazine, we eventually answered one advert that really caught our imagination.

Barbara Thurgood & Co Medical Services, based in Croydon seemed almost too good to be true. Their 28/31-day package included door-to-door service – and this to a hospital in Krakow, Poland! In response to our telephone call, Steven Thurgood explained the whole process to us and then we very carefully read all the literature that arrived the following morning. Acceptance of the Package for my hip replacement started with a visit to Croydon for a consultation with the Professor from Krakow who visited once a month to see new prospective patients and also to see post operative patients two months after their operations. We agreed to do this and my husband and I travelled up to Croydon for the consultation on Saturday 6th March, staying overnight at the Croydon Park Hotel. We met both Steven and Barbara Thurgood on the Saturday morning before going in for the consultation with Professor Franczuk who during the course of the morning, agreed to carry out the operation of a replacement hip. I had to take with me a completed Medical Questionnaire, signed by my GP and a copy of my recent X-Ray. I feel that what really clinched things for both myself and my husband was in meeting the patients there who had already had their operations and who were full of praise for all that they had encountered in Poland. So, we adjourned into an ante room and studied and signed the contract, made out the cheque and agreed that this was the way for me to go. The next flight was in a fortnight's time so the end of all the dreadful pain was now in sight.

The Thurgood's organisation and consideration of patients was superb, nothing seemed to have been overlooked. Everything ran very smoothly. A car arrived at my home in South Devon at lunch time on Saturday 20th March to take me to the Croydon Park Hotel to stay overnight. There were just two of us going to Krakow this time and we had an early breakfast before being taken by mini bus to Gatwick Airport, escorted throughout by the Thurgoods. Wheelchairs and electric buggy's took us straight onto the plane and our baggage was taken care of so we had no worries of any kind. Seats just behind first class and a very good 2 hour plus flight to Krakow. Same procedure there, by using an electric ramp, we were taken off the plane in wheelchairs and driven across the airport to the Arrival hall, again having baggage and passports taken care of. And just a ten minute ride in hospital transport to our final port of call, the College of Medicine (Collegium Medicum) which is part of the 600 year old Jagiellonian University, no hassle anywhere! All most impressive.

It was a wonderful adventure, starting with the introduction to the two English speaking co-ordinators, Milosz and Renate both employed by Barbara Thurgood, who visited us each day and helped with any problems we might have including shopping. I had a room to myself and shared the large shower room with the other English patient whilst in hospital but once we had moved into Rehabilitation, we each had our own room and private shower room. A telephone was provided for my personal use. From Monday morning until Thursday, the day of my operation, I was thoroughly examined, blood tested each day, X-Rays completed, an ECG done, met the team of doctors/surgeons and physiotherapists and was quite ready when Thursday morning came. Even whilst I was in hospital, the dreadful pain continued and I was in tears during at least one of the nights there, yes a Nurse did come and offer even more pain relief at that time.

The operation took place on Thursday morning, and I was still awake when I was taken into the operating theatre. It struck me as gleaming and pristine – which I hope all operating theatres are! – and I looked around for the surgeons and the saws and hammers that would be needed and was most disappointed when I couldn't see either. The two nurses in attendance were silent and quickly put a small plastic mask over my nose and I knew no more. I had an epidermal injection for the

operation, which I understand was about one and a half hours plus. Unknown to me of course, after the operation Barbara phoned my husband from Poland to reassure him that the operation had taken place and had gone well. I regained consciousness in the recovery room with three other patients and was aware at times of drips and having the blood bag changed and being told that it was my own blood reconstituted from the operation. There was a hard pillow between my ankles to ensure my legs stayed apart and although a bit uncomfortable, I wasn't aware of any pain as such, although at this stage it could have been due to pain killers being administered intravenously. The following morning I was returned to my own hospital room and my recovery began.

The first thing that struck me was that the **pain**, which had been a part of my life for so long, **had gone**. I also found that it was difficult to lift my right leg up from the bed, it seemed to weigh a ton. After two days the physiotherapists took over and began their work; "Passive Exercise" first of all by putting my leg into a machine which very slowly lifted it by bending the knee to a certain degree: this was increased daily: and lowering it also very slowly. This was carried out for an hour or more at a time and certainly helped the muscles. Then I was allowed out of bed and given a large wheeled Walker to lean on and walk behind, up and down the corridor, this I mastered quickly and during the same day started using elbow crutches. And from there on, I found the physiotherapists were wonderful. I was moved across the square to the Rehabilitation Centre, which became my home for the next three weeks. There was two hours of using the leg machine, a magnetic device and doing leg exercises in the morning with Pietrov (whom we called Peter), using the rest of the morning in walking along the corridors if it was a wet day or going outside for longer walks in the hospital grounds and then an hour and a half later in the afternoon in the gym. This consisted of being in a cage with the fourth side open, lying on a bed on your back or side and being strung up using straps, pulleys and chains which hooked into a catch on the strap around your leg or ankle and having weights on which increased as your leg got stronger and you were able to pull as far as you could to the side. Believe you me, this was very tiring by the end of the session but your leg certainly got stronger day by day.

The afternoon physio we called Magic and he was (his Polish name is Maciek); I had some back trouble whilst I was there and he worked wonders for me with his fingers and strength in his hands and had me right in a couple of days.

There were language problems of course, but the young doctors and the physiotherapists spoke English, common requests and phrases were written in both Polish and English and placed in each room to assist in sorting out difficulties.

So, by the time my stay was nearly completed, I was using just one walking stick outside and no aid at all in the building, Six weeks after my operation I am not walking yet as I used to, still with a slight limp and not very fast but I am convinced that without the marvellous physiotherapy provided, I would not have yet reached this stage of my recovery.

It was the **aftercare** and **physiotherapy** that attracted us to taking up the Polish experience and I do not regret doing so in any way!

The last thing provided as part of the "Package" was a trip around the centre of Krakow followed by a lunch and Renate and Milosz made lovely guides and were delightful company.

The journey back to Gatwick, escorted by Barbara Thurgood, went as smoothly as the flight out to Krakow, all assistance given with wheelchairs onto the plane and the same off the plane, all baggage and passports taken care of and then taken by electric buggy right to the entrance where the car to bring me back to my home in Totnes was waiting for me. What more could one ask for, I had the same good driver and the journey went quickly, even through a torrential rainstorm in the Bristol area.

The whole package is a credit to Barbara Thurgood and her organisation, and I would definitely recommend it to anyone who cannot wait months to be relieved of their pain, if anyone has decided to "go private" then this is the way to go, saving many thousands of pounds and having such wonderful aftercare with three weeks physiotherapy before being discharged from hospital.

Yes, of course it was good to be home and even though my husband had been in touch with me each day by phone, it was wonderful to be with him once more. We had also kept in touch using e-mail facilities organised by Barbara.

By the way, the icing on the cake was chatting to Nigel Kennedy (or Kennedy as he likes to be known now) on the plane going to Krakow – he was the only first Class Passenger and as my seat was the row behind, I just couldn't resist going up to him and thanking him for all the hours of pleasure he had given me over the years, to which he replied, "I wish my wife would say that!" Anyway, he was charm itself and took an interest in asking me what I was doing going to Krakow and seemed surprised when I told him I had bought a new hip and was going to have it fitted there – and to take away, once and for all, the dreadful pain in my right hip!

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