

TREATMENT WORKS! by Pete S.

It may sound strange, but Hepatitis C has turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me. As a person with a history of problems with drugs and alcohol, it finally got me to clean up my act. Moreover, both the disease and the treatment have made my life immeasurably richer than it might otherwise have been.

I believe I got Hep C from sharing intranasal drug paraphernalia (a means of transmission that is beginning to get more attention nowadays). I was diagnosed in 2005 after being evacuated from New Orleans due to Hurricane Katrina. Having been ill for a few days, I woke up one morning jaundiced and with other symptoms of acute liver disease. When I found out what it was, I was frightened, but determined to rise to the occasion: I quit drinking and drugs and started exploring my options. I did not have insurance and, when I got back to New Orleans, the public hospital there was not even able to give me a PCR test as their machine was under water. A doctor advised that immediate treatment was best since I had probably been infected recently, but I was in no position to do that under the circumstances.

I decided to move to New York. I was quite weak for months, but slowly improved and was able to start a new life. I got a job with health insurance. A biopsy in May 2007 that showed I was at Stage 2 in the progression of liver damage. My doctor advised treatment; I agreed but I wanted to enjoy the summer. I was scared, feeling like someone who was going off to war or to prison for a year. But I felt that it was the right thing to do at that time and that I had a stable set of circumstances for doing so: apartment, job and supportive network of family and friends.

I lived it up as best I could that summer, and in October '07 did my first injection. I was very sick for that first one, but less so for the second and third. I learned, mostly, to get used to it. Since I had genotype 1, I was in for the 48-week treatment. I was able to go to work for the entire duration of the treatment, only occasionally taking days off to rest. I went to a couple of different support groups that we have here in New York which I found very helpful.



Interferon therapy is one of the most difficult things I have ever done. I counted down the weeks and days till it would be over. Fortunately, my 4-week blood work showed my viral load to be undetectable, meaning I had an excellent chance of clearing the virus successfully. This helped keep me going through the long year. I had severe fatigue, appetite loss and weight loss (about 20 pounds). After about 7 weeks I got sufficiently anemic that my doctor put me on Procrit, which meant another weekly injection, which I hated. Still, I think the worst thing about treatment, for me, was the way it affected my mood and emotions. I would become extremely anxious and irritable to the point where I would find myself, for example, yelling at someone else in line at the grocery store.

When I had had enough of this sort of thing, I asked my doctor for help. He gave me an antidepressant, which helped a lot for a while but then problems returned. We doubled the dose,

which helped, but these mood issues continued to bring me a lot of misery until a couple of months after finishing the treatment.

However, despite it all, I was able to finish. I was so happy those first days when I didn't have to do any injections or take any pills, but the truth is that it took me some months to really get back to normal energy levels and feeling consistently good again. I was very relieved when my 3-month blood work came back clear, and ecstatic when, this past March, my 6-month labs showed I was STILL undetectable.

Ever since then, it is like I am walking on a cloud almost all the time. I don't want you to think I never laughed or had moments of joy while on treatment, but it was, overall, like traveling through a long dark tunnel. But it was worth it! Not only do I have a clean bill of health, I have had the immense satisfaction of facing my fear, doing what needed to be done and coming out the other side successful. I feel really good about myself, and my life is that much brighter for having gone through a dark time.

I continue to participate in and help with my local HCV support groups; I don't want to be one of those "clear and disappear" people. I feel I have a positive message that can help give hope to people who are on treatment or considering it. And, I've been drafted into advocacy work! In March a group of us went to Albany to talk to legislators about funding for HCV in the New York state budget. It was a lot of fun and it appears our efforts were successful!

I didn't ask for Hepatitis C but I believe in the old cliché about making lemonade when life deals you lemons. It has changed the direction of my life and brought unexpected and wonderful rewards, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

