Dear Gillian,

I am writing to tell you about how I was told I have MS.

It was 19 years ago at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. I was 31 years old, had been married for four years and our second daughter was a year old; our older daughter was three years old. We lived on an island in the Small Isles and life was idyllic for us; we were very happy. Prior to moving to the island I had been employed as a senior Occupational Therapist in Aberdeenshire and had been a practicing OT for ten years. For six of those years I worked in the community and often worked with people diagnosed with MS. Throughout my twenties I had experienced regular episodes of serious health problems, i.e., severe back pain and double vision, but no connection was ever made to the condition I worked with. It was only during my pregnancies that my symptoms became more noticeable and in the case of my weakening right leg, more permanent. I began to think I was either a raving hypochondriac or there was something seriously wrong with me.

The GP who covered our island referred me to a neurologist in Aberdeen, (my home town) so my daughters and I came to Aberdeen to stay with my parents for my planned admission. I was expecting and prepared to receive an MRI scan, a lumber puncture and other neurological tests over a few days. Immediately on arriving at the ward I was taken for an MRI scan and then I sat on the ward from 5pm until 2pm the next day with nothing further happening and no one able to give me any information. My next memories are rather vague as I assume I was in a state of shock and I was unfortunately on my own. The consultant who finally came to see me just came out and said, "Well you have MS. The scan was all we needed to see. It was conclusive and there really is nothing at this stage we can do for you. Just go home and get on with your life, and don't have any more children."

I felt like I had been hit in the face with a wet fish and I had to gather myself, leave the hospital and drive back to my parent's house and my girls. I remember wandering around the hospital shop trying to collect myself and not cry so that I could drive safely. The diagnosis of MS wasn't unexpected, my own knowledge of the disease made me aware of that, but is it was something else to actually hear it being directed at you.

We did return to live on the island but after 2 more years it became too difficult for me and we came back to live on the mainland permanently with our three daughters! We ignored the only piece of advice I was given, and yes having another daughter did take a lot out of me and probably accelerated my symptoms, but I wouldn’t be without her or her sisters for the world; what they took from me is so little in comparison to what I get in return.

When I reflect now on the 19 years since my diagnosis I am actually quite encouraged and surprised at where I am. I do exercises everyday and still walk as much as I can with a stick, sometimes two. I do have a wheelchair but I only use it occasionally for more arduous outings, partly because I now realise that it benefits those with me as much as it benefits me and we all started calling it “Jeeves” to make it more acceptable to me. I have only recently had to deal with more discomfort and pain and I do get good support from my excellent GP and my consultant, despite my initial shock and ambivalence towards him. He is as supportive as possible, acknowledging the limitations of treatment for people with MS and I know he considers me when appropriate trials for drugs and possible treatments become available.

Maintaining, as much as possible, a positive mental attitude keeps me strong enough to cope with everything life throws at me. I look back and think that the diagnosis I got 19 years ago could have been a lot worse; it hasn’t been so bad.

Nina