

Things I've Learned in 40 Years of Life with Diabetes: Paul Close



As a young man playing high school foot ball in 1969, I was getting beat around like a rag doll, often finishing the game with intense pain and muscle cramps. My doctors treated me for strep throat, and mono, but I never recovered and was losing weight, so they ordered a glucose tolerance test. My blood sugar peaked out in the 300s, and they started me on Orinase, which didn't help much. I was getting up 3 and 4 times every night to urinate, and had very little energy.

A year later, at the age of 15, I started seeing a new Doctor who immediately put me in the hospital to get regulated on insulin. My first night was spent in the jail ward with 2 "inmate" roommates, and I quickly learned that diabetes was all mine to handle. My parents were not willing to help.

It felt weird being treated like an invalid in the hospital, but I started feeling better and didn't have to get up to go to the bathroom as much. As my strength increased I started running, and did well with distance and endurance. I refused to believe the gloom and doom that some people expressed about my ability to manage diabetes, and by my senior year I ended up lettering in cross country. I started mountaineering with a high school friend and we climbed the Grand Tetons. We also took up hand gliding . . . At a time when it was considered very risky business, we were gliding off the Signal Mountain bluff and teaching others how to fly.

By the time I reached College I started to drink and smoke and my diabetes became a challenge. I experimented on myself and took more insulin when I felt bad, and cut back when I felt better. Keto Diasticks were my only way of testing, and they didn't help very much . . . But with trial and error I learned ways to control my diabetes.

From the time I left for college I pretty much managed on my own, until 1976 when, at the age of 22, I was invited to work as a counselor a TCDC (Tennessee Camp for Diabetic Children). When the Camp Doctors saw that I was still using U40 insulin, they called me up to the Infirmary and one of the Doctors from Vanderbilt started me on a new insulin regimen. This was my first experience of being around other people who had the same condition as I, and talking to people who had diabetes made me feel less isolated. It was the beginning of a lifelong learning experience.

In 1978 I met Kathy and we married a year later. I was always faithful in seeing a general practitioner for my yearly physical and blood work, but they never helped me with my diabetes and didn't seem to care. I didn't know who to trust or who to believe. By the mid 80s my eyes started giving me problems and I started seeing an ophthalmologist, and received my first laser surgery.

When Kathy became pregnant with our first daughter, I decided to quit smoking and drinking and began the straight and narrow path to live a long and healthy life. I realized that smoking effected my vascular circulation and the blood vessels in my eyes. And, although my eyes are better now . . . they are not as good as they could have been if I'd stopped smoking sooner. As a result of laser surgery my depth of field is not as good as it was, and my eyes are more sensitive to light because they don't dilate and constrict as easily as they used to.

It was not until 1998 that I saw my first Endocrinologist, who started me on 2 to 3 shots a day, and a year later he put me on an insulin pump. He tried to regulate me on the pump by placing me in the controlled environment of a hospital, which did not account for the real day to day life of a Contractor. I was constantly LOW and felt like I was having one big insulin reaction all the time. My pump was more in my way than it was of help. It made me angry that I could not tell my Doctor how I felt, and that he would tell me what I had to do based on what he thought I needed. . . without listening to hear what I was saying. I wanted help, but I was not getting answers to the questions I had.

My problems with blood glucose control added to the challenge of a work environment that was already stressful, and I began to have more work related injuries . . . with a broken wrist and two hurt discs within a 2 to 3 month time period. Then in 2001 a ladder fell out from under me, gravity took over . . . rather abruptly . . . and I broke my leg. Following surgery the doctors told me I may never walk again, and I was forced into using a walker. I knew it was time to find another Endocrinologist who could help me find answers.

That's when I found Dr Huffman. He has diabetes too, and the ability to talk to someone who has diabetes, who understands how you feel and knows what you were talking about, who could relate to my own experience . . . was like taking a breath of fresh air.

He asked me questions, he listened, and he had answers. Doc told me that an insulin pump should give me freedom to live life the way I want. He explained how poor blood glucose control can impact bone mass, and contribute to more injuries. He examined my bone density and thyroid and told me that my thyroid needed support. He told me how to make changes as needed to adapt diabetes to my life, and adjusted my pump settings so that I could use my pump as a tool for control . . . And within a week my blood sugar levels were constant without all the up, and down, and all around.

Since that time I have learned how to pay close attention to my entire body, so I can respond to its needs. Life continues to have its highs and lows, but with the help of caring friends and a supportive diabetes care team, I enjoy life and continue to do the things I love.

Important things that I have learned: after 40 years with diabetes:

Treat diabetes as a constant learning experience and don't take a break between learning sessions

Find someone who can stimulate you to want to learn more about your body and condition, and things you can do to make it better

Help others who have the same problems that you do . . . because too many have been told the wrong things . . . there are so many simple things to learn

Seek out health care providers who care about your well being and encourage you to learn

See your Primary Care Doctor every year and get your blood work drawn . . . even if you don't feel they are helping you . . .

See your Diabetes Care Team as often as you can

Paul recovered from his leg injuries and continues to walk and work in construction as a private contractor. He enjoys hunting, fishing, cooking, race cars, and time spent in the company of his daughters. Paul is a wealth of knowledge and experience and can keep you entertained for hours, as he shares antics of real life, lived well . . . with diabetes!