

The Perils of Ignorance

By Juliette O'Hea



By the time I was 27 years old in 1991, I had had AS for 16 years although I had only been diagnosed for 8 years.

I had been living in New Zealand for nearly 4 years, working as a physiotherapist in different parts of the country. At this point, I was living in beautiful Takaka in the north of the South Island. I had been pursuing a very active lifestyle and I had learnt to live with recurrent pain determined not to let this hold me back. Pursuits included mountain Climbing, Canoeing, and Windsurfing. I had also made friends with a local dolphin and we would play regularly together off the beach at Onekaka. Life was going swimmingly and I had no intention of that changing. Two more months to go and I would gain NZ citizenship. My dream was nearly a reality.

One day, I had the misfortune of being offered milk straight from a cow (via a jug!) and with no idea of the consequences, I drank it. It was warm and fairly unpalatable. This little sip was to change the course of my life forever.

Within 48 hours, I was laid up in bed with swollen knees and ankles. I felt really ill and I suffered from abdominal pain and diarrhoea. One of my eyes fogged over with uveitis but I had no idea that this was serious. Takaka was full of well meaning locals and doctors who had never come across a case like mine. It meant that I had to endure bad advice, enemas, special diets, the lot. After 3 weeks and no improvement, my twin brother (who also has AS) was despatched to bring me home. My heart ached as I left the country of my dreams.

It took me the best part of 2 years to recover and for most of that time, I was living back at home with my parents which was not easy. Active disease, pain and lack of sleep made me depressed. I had lost my friends, my independence, my income, and my

active lifestyle. It took me almost a year to walk without crutches and another year before I could work and live independently.

Why had this happened?

I had contracted *Campylobacter* from the unpasteurised milk. Not only had my life radically changed, but 2 years later, I was diagnosed with post-infective Crohns disease.

Why am I telling you this?

If I had been warned about the possible consequences of being exposed to unpasteurised milk products this would not have happened and my life would have taken a very different path. I believe that not enough information is given to AS patients about the risk of developing a reactive arthritis when exposed to common bacterial such as *Campylobacter* and *Salmonella*. Perhaps this should be a subject that is shared more widely with patients not just by the medical staff but by health professionals too. Please spread the word!

In the next instalment, I would like to share the positive side that this experience has had on my life.



Juliette