

Helen Fowler found new opportunities from a crippling disease

Becoming ill made me rethink my journalism

Before I got my diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (MS) two years ago, I used to work as a financial journalist. I was freelance but earning enough to pay the bills by writing about interest rates, inflation and inter-bank activity. I combined this with the occasional stint in public relations, usually for financial services firms.

Then I got the bombshell of learning that I was sick. And pretty seriously so. Or so the doctors said. I couldn't walk for a time. My sight disappeared.

I had to come to terms with having a chronic, degenerative disease. It affects my nervous system. Mine and that of 50,000 other Brits too.

A diagnosis like that changes how you view almost everything. After my sight and mobility came back a bit, I started thinking more seriously about how I wanted to spend my working time.

Getting sick has changed my professional and personal priorities in ways I could not have predicted. Alongside my financial writing, it's become more important to do something of personal significance.

Among my reasons for entering journalism in the first place was a desire to bring the truth to light. Idealistic, maybe. But I come from a family with a long legacy of mental illness; we lived with lots of secrets.

So, in my early days as a journalist, I was keen on bringing secrets out into the open. That gave me my drive. I worked on the Lockerbie investigation at The Sunday Times and wrote front page news stories on scandals at insurer Lloyd's of London. I went undercover in Tenerife to expose dubious techniques involved in timeshare sales.

Following my diagnosis, I wanted to

go back to the kind of work with human interest that I started out doing. So I got in touch with The Scotsman and wrote a travel piece for them about a family holiday – one where MS came along too.

The travel piece led to a semi-regular column for the paper. I write about life as a parent with this illness. I've written about driving around Alnwick Gardens on a mobility scooter with my children. It all felt somewhat at odds with the fairy tale theme of the gardens but, perhaps unexpectedly, we had a great time, laughing and giggling as we went. Another recent piece looks at how I took my kids to a local museum, prompting a comparison between medical care now and more than a 100 years ago.

I've written about the difficulty of making my limbs do what I want. How I got a fright when nerve damage affecting my hands meant I couldn't get the front door key in the lock. One piece covered the struggle to get a Christmas tree out of the car and into my home.

MS isn't very well understood. Even GPs are still baffled by it. The arrival of MRI machines that can see inside brains has changed how sufferers are viewed. For centuries, we were written off as "hysterics" inventing our "invisible" illness.

Having MS is frustrating in many ways. I may look "normal". I don't need to use my stick every day; although my gait is a bit strange and I can't walk for long, I often do so unaided.

But I struggle every day with crippling exhaustion that limits all activities. There's a lot of pain too,

even when I'm not in an acute episode.

This illness sucks. Going blind every so often – and not knowing whether my sight is going to come back or not – is just, well, terrifying.

But I can still write. And, in a funny sort of way, this is the kind of work that I always longed to do. I've wanted to use my writing to bring stuff to light, to spread the word about what is going on for people under the surface.

My hope is that I'm giving a voice to the thousands of men and women struggling with illnesses like mine.

My aim is for my writing to explain what is going on with our brains. Not at a medical level, but in terms of the illness's impact on people's lives.

It feels a bit like I've gone undercover. I may not be able to come out of this particular role whenever I want. But, if I'm giving some support to fellow sufferers, then it's a job worth doing.

“ Among my reasons for entering journalism in the first place was a desire to bring the truth to light. Idealistic, maybe. But I come from a family who lived with lots of secrets ”



For all the latest news from the NUJ go to www.nuj.org.uk