

# JK Rowling *diagnosed* my MS

In a chance meeting, the famous author revealed a truth to Helen Fowler that was confirmed years later

**I**n the early spring of 2006, I was trudging along the Edinburgh pavements in harsh sunshine, with my newborn daughter asleep in her pram. The cherry trees were in bloom and the sun was emerging again after a long winter.

My gait had become ungainly in recent months; I often stumbled and waddled slightly, which I'd put down to my recent pregnancy. As I pushed the pram along, I spotted another woman about the same age as me, smartly dressed and standing alone outside one of the shops.

The woman smiled at me. I felt grateful

for the contact with another adult, especially someone who seemed – given the understanding look in her eyes – to be a mother herself. We started to exchange pleasantries.

I couldn't quite place her. She seemed too much her own person to fit into any stereotypes – well dressed, but in an artistic, original way. She also looked oddly familiar. Did we know each other from school, I wondered? Or maybe university or mutual friends?

She said something nice about my baby that filled me with pride. I couldn't stop myself from commenting on how tiring it was looking after a young baby.

'I'm exhausted all the time,' I admitted.

She agreed that caring for a newborn can be tiring.

I'd expected to get my energy back once my daughter started sleeping through the night, but my new-found friend made me think again. Like a bolt out of the blue, she raised an idea nobody had ever suggested before.

'Do you have multiple sclerosis?' she asked.

'No. No, I don't...' I stammered in bewilderment, feeling a chill run through me at the very idea. Why on earth

would anyone think I had MS? It sounded terrifying. Back then I'd only ever heard of it in relation to the cellist, Jacqueline du Pré.

The lady apologised and we went our separate ways.

It was only as I walked away that I clocked who she was – none other than JK Rowling, the *Harry Potter* author.

My health was fine as far as I was concerned but I couldn't stop the worry from niggling away at the back of my mind over the following months.

A couple of years later, aged 40, I lost the sight in my right eye, and doctors warned that it could be a symptom of MS.

Frightened, I began endless internet searches and that's when I realised why JK Rowling would, of course, be sensitive to the signs. Her mother had died from the illness, aged only 45.

In 2014, a full eight years after that chance encounter with JK Rowling, I discovered I did indeed have MS, just as she had guessed from little more than my odd walk. By that stage, I had a host of other symptoms too. My balance was affected and so was my stamina – I couldn't walk more than 20 metres without being exhausted. My memory

**'I can't help wishing I'd listened to her more closely'**



JK Rowling, with her baby sister and her mum, who sadly died aged 45

## MS FACT FILE

**MS is a chronic, inflammatory illness of the central nervous system that damages the brain and spinal cord, interrupting the crucial flow of messages between different parts of the body.**

- ✦ The most common form of the illness is 'relapsing remitting'. Damage to the nerves is mostly temporary, and sufferers can experience full or partial recovery.
- ✦ In its rarer 'primary progressive' form, patients experience a steady deterioration from the onset.
- ✦ The illness can affect balance, vision, swallowing, mobility, continence and memory, as well as causing problems with thinking, learning and planning. Fatigue is a common problem.
- ✦ It affects 2.3 million people around the world, and at least twice as many women as men, though the reason for that remains unclear. It's virtually unknown in countries around the equator – its incidence is higher in more northerly regions.
- ✦ There is currently no cure, but treatments can combat symptoms and help prevent further damage.
- ✦ For more information, visit the MS Trust ([mstrust.org.uk](http://mstrust.org.uk)) and the MS Society ([mssociety.org.uk](http://mssociety.org.uk)).

## How could JK Rowling have spotted Helen's MS?

**Bestselling author JK Rowling tragically lost her mother to complications connected to MS in 1990, when her mum was just 45. Talking about it on *Woman's Hour*, she admitted it brought 'guilt and worry and anxiety' into her life. She has subsequently become a generous benefactor to institutions involved with the illness. Last September, she gave a £15.3m donation to the Anne Rowling Regenerative Neurology Clinic, a state-of-the-art centre in the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, founded in her late mother's memory.**

was also impaired; at my worst, I struggled even to remember the names of my own children, and my coordination was so bad I had difficulty getting to the bathroom without help.

At the moment, I have a relatively benign form of the illness, known as relapsing remitting, which means that I have recovered, to a limited extent, from some symptoms. But the illness means I sometimes need a walker to get around, and the rest of the time I rely on a stick.

I often think back to that sunny day on a Morningside pavement when JK Rowling accurately guessed that I had MS. I can't help wishing I'd listened to her more closely. If I'd got help sooner I might have been able to get medication to slow down the disease and prevent it from going on to do so much damage.

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Helen, now 52, pictured here with her daughter, is living with relapsing remitting MS