A Bit of Background

April 8, 2015 By Greg Jefferys

When I got the news that I had Hepatitis C. I was a very fit 60 years old (at the time of writing this I am 61). I had been given a liver function test a few years earlier (2011) as part of a routine health check and all my liver functions showed a very healthy liver with all enzyme levels in the best possible range. The only recreational drug I have used for many years is alcohol, mostly in the form of red wine and, whilst I did enjoy a regular glass or two, even the occasional glass or three or four at a party, I was not a serious or heavy drinker.

I had been in a happy, monogamous marriage for over 35 years. I was not bisexual and did not engage in any unusual sexual practices that involved blood. I had no tattoos or body piercings and had not had a blood transfusion; however I had used intravenous drugs regularly in 1974, mostly heroin. I gave up drug use in late 1974 and was clean for about six months then weakened and had one hit in early 1975. That one injection resulted in a severe overdose and me getting very close to being dead. After that I never injected drugs again.

So I had not used intravenous drugs for 40 years and during that forty years had had a couple of liver function tests that all showed a healthy liver and no sign of Hep C. although I don't think that I was ever specifically tested for Hepatitis C. So in August 2014, I spent many days and nights agonising over how I could have contracted this disease in my recent, clean lived, past. In the mean time my adult children and my wife all had tests to check if they had contracted Hep C and, fortunately, none had.

Whilst I was agonising over how I had contracted Hepatitis C. and spending a lot of time checking out the various websites related to Hep C, I underwent more tests. My doctor was concerned that the high liver enzyme levels might indicate liver cancer or advanced cirrhosis of the liver so he ordered liver scans. First I had an ultrasound, which indicated that there was no cirrhosis and no indication of tumors or lesions.

By late October I was able to see the nurse and doctor of the Hepatitis Clinic at the Hobart Royal Hospital and they ordered more blood tests, including for HIV and two other liver scans, a liver flexibility test and a CT scan. The doctor was not convinced by the ultrasound and still suspected that I might have liver cancer.

By coincidence at this point in time a good friend of mine was diagnosed with advanced liver cancer.

The liver flexibility test showed no problem and the CT scan confirmed that there was no cirrhosis and no cancer. All this seemed to indicate that I had acute Hepatitis C rather than chronic. That is to say the tests indicated that I had contracted the disease recently rather than a long time ago and that made no sense at all.

However there appeared to be no way that I could have contracted Hep C. other than through my intravenous drug use 40 years prior. Googling seemed to indicate that Hepatitis C could remain dormant in a person for about 20 years however there was not much to suggest it could stay dormant and undetected for 40 years.

Here I have to say that the nurse at the Hobart Hepatitis Clinic was amazingly helpful. I attended the Clinic with my wife and we discussed the mental turmoil we were going through because all the reading we had done suggested that, whilst Hep C could lay dormant for 20, perhaps 30, years there was nothing to suggest a dormancy period of 40 years. The nurse's response was she had no problem with the idea of the virus lying dormant in my body for that period of time. She said that she had personally encountered cases such as mine with a dormancy period of thirty to forty years and that there was a body of evidence to suggest that an infection with another virus, such as a dose of the flu, could trigger the onset of dormant Hepatitis C, particularly when the carrier was getting on in age, like I was.

The other reassuring piece of information from talking with the Hep nurse was that she told us that she had never met anyone in a monogamous heterosexual relationship who had contracted Hep C from sex.

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