

The I of the needle

New book celebrates a life lived with diabetes

BY BRUCE WARD, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN NOVEMBER 3, 2010



In 1975, Steve Beriault biked across Canada.

Photograph by: Image courtesy, Steve Beriault

Tales in the Insulin Vial

By Steve Beriault

\$17.99 hardcover, \$10.99 paperback

talesintheinsulinvial.com, amazon.ca

In the summer of 1975, the Citizen ran a story about Steve Beriault, a college student from Pembroke who had cycled home from Vancouver, a distance of about 4,830 kilometres.

Beriault's journey was far from finished. After a four-day break, he set out for St. John's, NL, about 1,850 kilometres down the road. When he arrived there in August, Mayor Dorothy Wyatt issued a proclamation in his honour.

Beriault met many people along the way who marvelled at his sense of adventure. Imagine their astonishment had they known he was a diabetic.

"People were amazed at what I was doing, but I never told anybody I was diabetic," he says today. "They thought a diabetic could never do it, and that it was way beyond their capability.

"Back in my day, mention diabetes and everybody thought you were weird. I kept my mouth shut and tried to be like everyone else. I wouldn't go to school and say, 'By the way, I was unconscious last night for 20 minutes because I took too much insulin and had a hypoglycemic reaction.'"

Beriault's new book *Tales In The Insulin Vial* traces his lifelong fight with juvenile, or type 1, insulin-dependent diabetes. Published by Raider Publishing, it's out in time for Diabetes Awareness Month.

Beriault is among the 10 per cent of diabetics who have type 1 diabetes. Some nine million people live with diabetes or prediabetes in this country, according to the Canadian Diabetes Association.

Now 59, Beriault was diagnosed after his parents saw their two-year-old son drag a chair to the kitchen sink to drink water drops from the tap. Extreme thirst is a major symptom of the disease.

With type 1 diabetes, the body destroys pancreatic cells that produce insulin, a hormone that helps cells absorb the glucose they use for energy. Without insulin, glucose stays in the bloodstream and damages organs, among other harmful effects. Scientists have not determined its cause.

Over the years, the disease has taken its toll on Beriault. He has had a kidney transplant, and both legs have been amputated below the knee. He also has heart damage and impaired vision.

"Diabetes is a rat that sits on your shoulder and gnaws at you," he once said. "Every time you give it a chance, it takes a chunk out of you."

In 2008, Beriault underwent a pancreas transplant. If successful, it would mean he would never have to inject insulin again. The pancreas produces insulin, via beta cells, whenever the body requires it.

"Here was a chance that I was going to get out of being a diabetic. But it didn't go as planned," Beriault says.

After three months, doctors decided that the new pancreas had to be removed because of infections. Beriault was back on insulin injections and will be for the rest of his life.

Yet he is remarkably cheerful, considering how the disease has affected him. When Beriault's kidney was failing, he worked up a sort of Vegas act for his fellow patients to make time pass more easily during their dialysis treatments. He'd sing, crack jokes, and generally goof around. Soon patients were arriving early to sit near him during dialysis sessions.

Treatment of the disease has improved remarkably since Beriault was growing up.

"My father would sharpen needles on flint stones, and those needles hurt," he recalls. "They were 27-gauge steel, and they had burrs. I'd pull the needle out and a hunk of skin would come with it, and I'd be bleeding all over the place."

Insulin itself is now a much better product, he says.

"The impurities were something like 10 per cent by volume then. Now insulin's purity is one part per million. That's like one speck in a million grains of sand."

When Beriault was cycling across the country, he'd inject himself with insulin once a day and rely on a squirt of honey from a plastic bottle whenever his body told him that his blood sugars were out of whack.

He and his wife Maria have two sons, Dan and Nick. When he was five, Nick was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes, or type 1, like his dad.

The advances in fighting the disease mean that Nick has normal blood sugar levels most of the time.

"He's 22 now and doing quite well," says Beriault. "He's on multiple injection systems, he's using a pump now, and he has a blood glucose monitoring device, which I didn't have until I was 30."

"I was on a single injection of insulin a day. Anyone now would look at you like you're crazy to do something like that. That's the way we did it back then."

Beriault now has six to seven insulin injections a day, and uses ultra-fine coated needles that are virtually painless.

After learning to walk again with his new prosthetic legs, Beriault got involved with the Steel Legs Walk, a fund-raising event in Toronto for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation.

He has completed five of the annual 5k walkathons, and has personally raised more than \$106,000.

Beriault is retired from his job as director of health care services at National Data Corp., a firm that processes electronic health claims for insurance companies.

"I wrote the book to show that although the disease is tough, there are success stories. You have troubles, but they can't hold you back from doing things in life."

Beriault lives with his family in Newmarket, near Toronto.

"My wife and I are still in love," he says, adding that they have "an average middle-class life."

But by now, you'll have figured out that there is nothing average about Steve Beriault.

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