

New treatment offers hope

“I was worried about the future. Once it flared up and I couldn’t work for six weeks – that really scared me. I didn’t want to land up in a wheelchair on a disability pension.”

BY TAMMY LABER

Randy Rath was only 30 when he first developed the symptoms of psoriatic (sore-e-AA-tick) arthritis. “It started with plaques – raised skin – on my hands and elbows. Soon I had stiffness in my joints and fingers, then one knee got really bad. Within a few years it would take me a half hour to get out of bed and I was in constant pain all the time. It was even difficult to sleep.”

No one knows for sure what causes psoriatic arthritis, which creates pain and swelling in some joints and scaly skin patches on some areas of the body. Genetic and environmental factors both appear to play a role. Some researchers believe certain bacteria or fungal agents may cause chronic stimulation of the immune system, which in turn could cause arthritis in people with a genetic susceptibility to psoriatic arthritis.

Psoriatic arthritis affects men and women of all races and usually occurs between the ages of 20 and 50, but can occur at any age. It affects up to 30 per cent of people who have psoriasis.

According to Dr. Dafna Gladman of Toronto Western Hospital, new biological medications have been very useful to some patients. “The biological response modifiers reduce the effects of a substance made by the immune system which promotes inflammation. They address the underlying cause of the

inflammatory disease by binding with the substance (tumor necrosis factor alpha or TNF-alpha), so that it is blocked and cannot promote inflammation. They help both the skin and joint manifestations of this disease.”

An inflammatory disease related to psoriasis, psoriatic arthritis involves the body’s immune system attacking not only the skin but also the joints and surrounding tissues. About 95 per cent of those with psoriatic arthritis have swelling in joints outside the spine, and more than 80 per cent have pitting of fingernails and toenails. Swelling of fingers and toes, giving them a “sausage” appearance, is also common.

The joint pain caused by psoriatic arthritis often is associated with stiffness, especially in the morning. One third of sufferers also have neck and/or back pain and stiffness, which may further limit movement. People who develop psoriatic arthritis may experience either the skin or joint symptoms first, or both may appear simultaneously.

For Mr. Rath, a TV cameraman who’s on the move all the time, the disease took a huge emotional toll. “I was worried about the future. Once it flared up and I couldn’t work for six weeks – that really scared me. I didn’t want to land up in a wheelchair on a disability pension,” he explains. Mr. Rath’s doctors tried every treatment available at the time – gold injections, steroids, radioactive injections. “Nothing really worked,” Mr. Rath says.



PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Psoriatic arthritis patient Randy Rath was stricken with the disease when he was just 30 years old. Advanced biologic therapeutics now help him and others live normal lives despite their illness.

His early detection was nevertheless a key factor in Mr. Rath’s ultimately successful treatment.

About four years ago Mr. Rath’s doctor learned of a new treatment

distributed by pharmaceutical-biotech companies Amgen Canada Inc. and Wyeth Canada. “It’s one of the class of biological medications. I inject it twice a week, and it’s put my

disease into remission,” he says. For Mr. Rath, the biological treatment has been, “like a miracle. I can operate like a normal person again. It’s given me back my life.” ■