

Case study

Janet Beale

Janet Beale came down to earth, almost literally, a few years ago when her training as a professional helicopter pilot had to be suspended due to the focal dystonia in her right foot. After some thirty learning hours with a trainer it was time for her first solo flight. But, not surprisingly, medical checks are paramount for prospective pilots and Janet's dystonia meant she failed the medical, grounding her promising career as an instructor.

She takes up the story: "From near where I live in Kent, I was training to be a helicopter pilot in 2004–6, flying the two-seaters you see the police use to monitor traffic, or TV crews filming car chases, with a view to becoming a helicopter instructor. I had completed a good thirty hours. Medicals are a strict part of the process, and due to my medication and the dystonia being in my right foot, I was unable to take a solo flight. In flying helicopters you require both feet to control the yaw pedals, which gives balance and direction."

Brought down to earth with a bump, Janet thanked her lucky stars she had decided to hang onto her career as a counsellor and psychotherapist, a friend pointing out that, had she abandoned that before failing the pilot's medical, she would have been high and dry career-wise.

Commented Janet, "Had I qualified as an instructor and given up my work as a counsellor/psychotherapist before my dystonia had really taken hold, I would have lost everything, being unable to fly and then having to work hard to regain my career in the therapy world. Maybe it was a blessing, but it didn't feel like it at the time. I hope to return to flying helicopters in the next month or two with a co-pilot, who can take over if and when the spasms hit. It's not like riding a bike, controlling a hover takes precise use of both feet and hands, a tricky one with dystonia. Despite this, the experience outweighs the spasms and pain, and one which I would do over and over again!"

Janet can trace her focal dystonia back to her sixties childhood. Then it was pain in her legs, not something to worry about since she and others in her family accepted it as 'growing pains'. But, two decades later and Janet suffers an exceptionally discomfoting time with her right foot and

leg, the pain now taking the form of cramping and burning, along with shaking and twitching, as well as an inward turning of the right foot.

Like so many people eventually confirmed as having dystonia, Janet spent many years before she finally received an accurate diagnosis. At first she was told that her symptoms were a form of fibromyalgia, then plantar fasciitis, a pain under the heel, and the resultant treatment she received was predicated on that basis. Some ten years later correct diagnosis arrived. Janet moved to Lydd and her new GP referred her to a pain clinic and they referred her to a neurologist which led to a correct diagnosis of dystonia.

So, is the medicine working? 'No!' is the short answer. But Janet is very bullish, "Under neurologists, pain clinics, and my physiotherapist, since I also have joint hypermobility, I have attempted various medications to control the dystonia but all have had little remedial affect. I am currently trying a different drug regime and possible botulinum toxin injections. I am also trying holistic reflexology and aromatherapy which, working in partnership with the reflexologist, can at times soothe the cramps and relax the dystonic muscle."

Complicating matters for Janet is that she is under pressure to continue to work. She explains, "I was widowed at a young age and have to continue working to support myself. The financial impact can be difficult sometimes. Being self-employed, if I have to take time off from work due to the condition or medical appointments, I lose money each time."

However she is not spiritually down, "I have a very determined nature and a great sense of humour so I still try to do as much as I can manage. Maybe too much sometimes, but life is for living, not for living to the tune of dystonia. I've had some great moral support from Polar Helicopters at Manston airport. Their belief in me has been inspirational. I'm sure the future holds many good things, but I can see that it is going to be a difficult time ahead as I get older. I live in hope that the treatment will one day give me back my life where I can wake up pain and spasm free."



● Janet Beale