

Fun Dad wins through

Rev. Warner Pidgeon

2006 was a very memorable year for the Rev. Warner Pidgeon. In the summer, he moved from his post as assistant curate at Fair Oak, near Winchester, to take up a new appointment as vicar at Christ Church, in Billericay, Essex. Then, just a few months later, his joy in creating friendships with his new parishioners was tempered by the onset of what was, two years later, correctly diagnosed as spasmodic torticollis. Now in his forty-third year, Warner takes up the story.

"It was September 2006 and I was at a football match, watching Gillingham at home, turning my head to the right hoping to see a goal and it felt like I had pulled a muscle. The symptoms slowly got worse. One side of my neck became swollen. My head began to tilt and twist, eventually twisting in three directions. The pain was severe, made worse by the fact that I had three prolapsed discs in my neck. They were replaced with titanium coils during an operation in January 2008."

As a newly arrived vicar in a busy suburban parish, a twisted neck and head position was not the best calling card in building relationships with Christ Church's flock. But, in common with many others affected, Warner was not to get to the bottom of what had struck his neck, twisting his head, for another two years.

Warner's odyssey through the health service began with his GP. Warner explains, "When I first sought medical advice I was given anti-inflammatory pills and after an x-ray, was told I simply had spondylosis. In other words, the discs in my neck were a bit worn down. This was partially true but the medication was wrong and it took several months for my GP to decide to refer me to a consultant."

"First of all, I saw an orthopaedic consultant who initially injected me with cortisone under general anaesthetic but my symptoms got much worse. Exhausted as to causes, in desperation he suggested replacing the three discs!"

"Physiotherapy also made the symptoms worse. Finally, in 2008, I was referred to the National Hospital in Queen Square, London, where at the Institute of Neurology I saw one of the many experienced doctors at the Centre – but only after an orthopaedic consultant told me he had never seen anyone with my condition ever before."

The doctor recognised Warner's symptoms as dystonic, which was confirmed a few weeks later following tests. He could offer no cure, simply a course of botulinum toxin injections, perhaps for the rest of his life. And that's been Warner's medical regime since 2008, "Four injections in my neck every thirteen to sixteen weeks. Thankfully, they are working well."

Not surprisingly, Warner's job as vicar was affected, essentially put on hold for almost a year, "I was unable to work for nine months when my symptoms were at their worst in 2008," he commented, "but since December 2008 I have been back at work full-time and my quality of life now is very good."

"Family and friends have been very supportive. But 2008 was a very difficult year for them as they fought to understand what was happening to me. I remember one of my children saying then that I wasn't as much fun as I used to be. During 2009, when I was able to get out and about, it was good to be a 'fun-dad' once again!"

"During 2010 I was determined to improve my fitness. In June I ran a 5k Fun Run which is something I would never have thought possible back in 2008, having spent over six months effectively in bed due to the intense pain and discomfort of the twisted neck."

"My parishioners, too, were very caring, loving and patient as I climbed my own personal mountain to overcome this unremitting illness. Now, thankfully, the future is very bright. I even play a little gentle 5-a-side football in my spare time!"

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● Rev. Pidgeon