

# Newt's story: three li

In about four hours time, I will be taking the last of my pills; the pink Ribavirins that have been a constant for the last six months. The final tablets will be taken from the plastic dispenser, which has the week divided into seven days, and each day halved into a red slot and a blue slot: red for the morning, blue for the evening. Filling those little divisions of 'am' and 'pm' with pills on a Tuesday night and sticking to the Pegasys system, have been the routines by which I have led the last half year of my life: two pills in the morning, three at dinner; seven days a week, for twenty-four weeks. I have completed the course of my injections: the last, six days ago, and now I am left with just three little pills.

It's the end of an era for me; a period of time measured in weeks, in days really, (hours in fact) as completing this hep C program has been my

short term goal, in the last eight weeks, and I've almost achieved it. Strange, now it's this close, because I made a lot of mistakes on this program.

I was using heroin throughout the treatment; in fact using heroin for the last twenty-five years, that's more than half my life – this is what got me the virus in the first place, and here I am, trying to get well, and I am still whacking up! I didn't tell the doctors, I didn't tell the nurses, and I sure as shit didn't tell my partner.

It was all going good, it was going so well; my using was under-control; no-one was the wiser. I was on a treatment plan for hep C that was manageable; I was tired, but not too badly knocked around. My main problems were a saddle of itchy rashes, across my shoulders and back, that drove me insane; fatigue and mood swings that got progressively worse. The worse



# ittle pills

they swung, the more I used; the more I used, the more fatigued I got and the more my moods swung, making me use more!

My drug use spiralled out of control, and one day, eight weeks ago, my wife said to me: “You are using!” It was not a question, it was a statement of fact, and I was too tired, too exhausted from the lies and pretence to deny it. “Yes,” I nodded. It was a major admission and it kick started huge changes in my life.

The first thing I did was to tell the nurses and my case manager at the clinic exactly what I had been doing. I told them everything I had been up to, and where I was now. Then we discussed how we were going to tackle the rest of my program. They listened, they didn’t judge, they didn’t actually care – they had heard it all before and they just wanted to know what I planned to do next. So now, all of a sudden, I am making plans, I have got a future! Not only that, I have got a goal – an achievable goal, an attainable target, and they are going to do everything they can to assist me to hit that target! I think it was this – this no guilt, no fuss, and no nonsense approach as much as anything that helped me get some perspective.

We set a short term goal of completing the Pegasys program. Against good advice, I got off Methadone and on to Suboxone. That was really difficult, absolutely hideous. I was ill-prepared and I would not advise anyone to make that change. However, for me, it was the right choice; it was the only choice! It got me off something that had enabled my drug use for the last ten years.

And so, I threw myself into my recovery. I had a goal, I had a plan and now I had support. The clinic had provided counselling but I had never taken it seriously or I had used it cursorily. Now, I was talking to them, I was telling them my fears. I was raging and crying and cursing and listening and learning; it was wonderful.

If you learn nothing from my story, learn this: use the structures the clinics have in place. Let them help you! Ask them in! You don’t have to like them; you just have to talk to them! I saw whoever I could on any given day. I went twice a week at the start, then once a week as things settled down.

They were great; patient, supportive and they really helped me to clarify my thoughts and get some treatment strategies for my drug problem.

The hep C interferon and ribavirin treatment known as combination treatment affects everybody differently, but chances are, it will affect your moods. You are more on edge, emotions are closer to the surface; you have got doubts and fears and that’s just your psyche!

Physically, you can have rashes, fatigue, cold sores, ulcers, dry skin, itches, insomnia, loss of libido, weight loss and appetite loss. You can feel like you are falling apart. I had all this, and I had a pretty good run! (Except for the itching – it drove me mad!)

When you throw in the day-to-day dramas of life, work, friends and family as well, it is a big ask to get through it without a bit of support, without a bit of guidance, without someone to help you navigate a course through the worst of the treatment. Talk to the counsellors; they have got the experience. They have seen it play out, they know how it works and best of all, they are there just for you. Your nurses and your case manager are your advocates, they work for you. They have your interests at heart and they want to help you get through your treatment.

I am working on salvaging my relationship; I am working on salvaging myself and I’ve got three tablets to take in four hours’ time and it will be over. Not done, not complete, but this stage of the treatment will be over, and I am prepared to deal with what’s next. In a way, the outcome is irrelevant to me; it’s been about the process. I know I am going to be clear of the bug, I know it! So much positive has come from this: I am ready to deal with whatever happens, either way!

There is so much more to this treatment than having to take 35 pills and an injection a week. It’s going to change your life, one way or the other. Be a participant in your own recovery and use all the resources, demand them. Talk to your nurses and your case manager, talk to the CNC, they are there for you, they are your team.

Seven-fifty pm – I took my last three pills... and my wife was there.

- **Newt, NSW.**