

Botox cured my illness

ANGELA EPSTEIN, Daily Mail – 13th February 2001

Brian McCormack, a 39-year-old electrical contractor, lives in Newbury, Berkshire. Since last year he has suffered from Spasmodic Torticollis, a dysfunction of the brain which causes the head to twist to one side because of repeated muscle contractions in the neck.

Through injections of Botox - widely used as a cosmetic device to remove wrinkles - Mr McCormack's condition is now under control. Here he tells his story.

To be honest, it makes me laugh when I hear about people who are using Botox to smooth out wrinkles and get rid of frown lines - all for the sake of vanity.

To me, Botox is a lifeline which is helping me control an illness that would otherwise have taken over my life.

My problems began last year when my fiancée Linzey and I spent nine months travelling around Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand.

But then, three months before we were due to come home, I started to suffer from really bad neck pain. It felt like someone was pushing their thumb into the base of my neck.

I saw a chiropractor and afterwards it seemed to settle down. But within a week or so my neck started aching again, and it also felt very stiff. I decided to have a deep tissue massage to try to loosen the muscles.

We continued touring but the pain got worse. In fact, the only time I wasn't in pain was when I lay down.

What really frightened me, though, was when my head started to make slight involuntary movements. I convinced myself it was just severe neck strain, and not some terrible illness.

My head would judder up and down, and the only way I could stop it was by either lying down or holding my chin in my hand when I was walking about. People would stare at me because I looked so odd.

It got to the stage where I would sit down for breakfast and be unable to put a spoon in my mouth because my head was moving about so much.

My biggest concern was that my head was beginning to twist to one side, too. But because it had been such a gradual, almost imperceptible, process, and I didn't feel unwell, I didn't want to cut short our trip.

Instead, I again sought out alternative help, including a full body massage which attempted to realign all my tendons from my neck to my ankles. But nothing worked.

By now several weeks had passed and things were getting worse. My head had turned completely to the left - I had to turn my whole body round if I wanted to look right - and my shoulder had dropped by three inches.

I went to see a local doctor, who did some basic co-ordination tests. He advised me to visit a neurologist in Darwin, who organised a scan.

Afterwards, he broke the news that it was Spasmodic Torticollis, a localised disability caused by a dysfunction in the brain which makes neck muscles involuntarily contract.

I was bewildered by all this information - particularly as I was so far from home. There were so many questions. Would I be like this for ever? Was there any cure?

Back home, I was referred to Newbury Hospital, where doctors confirmed the diagnosis. I began to panic but they reassured me that the treatment was quite straightforward.

It would involve a series of injections of Botox into the overactive muscles, which would cause them to relax and allow the head and neck to return to a normal position.

I had three injections at my first sitting in July last year. Fortunately, they didn't hurt too much, and the effect kicked in after a week or so as the muscles gradually relaxed. Every nine weeks I have to return for repeat injections.

Botox can't cure Spasmodic Torticollis but it can relieve the symptoms. Before treatment, mine had got so bad that my head was juddering and my neck was so severely twisted that I couldn't do anything.

I'd spend the day lying down with my head on a cushion, and I felt permanently exhausted from all the head movements. I had to take five months off work.

The effect of the Botox has been cumulative. Now my head is facing forwards again, instead of to the side, and the involuntary movements in my neck have almost stopped. I'm back at work but I'm still too exhausted to do more than a three-day week.

There is a chance that I could make a spontaneous recovery, but I'll probably have to rely on Botox to keep my illness in check.