

Up Front

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The war of ME and me

Clare Kerr, daughter of Michael Ancram, tells how she fought her way back to health over seven years

One morning seven years ago I woke up to find myself unable to get out of bed in time for morning registration at school. My legs ached as though I had run a marathon, my head pounded with every breath I took. A sense of complete exhaustion overwhelmed me; just keeping my eyes open was almost more than I could manage. I would have been scared had I not been so excruciatingly tired.

These symptoms marked the start of a long battle against post-viral fatigue (ME). I was 17 and had just recovered from a nasty bout of glandular fever. After three months of sleep and daytime television, it had been a joy to be back at school. The excitement had been marred only by the volume of work I needed to do, studying into the night to catch up on the previous term. As each night passed, a haze of essays and a few hours of sleep, I became exhausted to the point that I could no longer make sense of the words in front of me.

Then, six weeks into term, came the morning when I could barely move. Four hours later I was downstairs on the phone to my parents. I don't remember how I got there. By this stage I had tunnel vision and friends' soothing voices sounded like shrieks.

I pleaded with my mother to come and take me home. The next few hours passed in a state of oblivion. I remember lying in the corridor outside the staff room, aware only of figures standing above me, but I have no recollection of what happened after that. Back at home, my mother had to support me as we climbed stairs one by one.

Two days later my mother drove me to London to see a doctor. Looking back, this decision was disastrous. Unknown to us, my doctor didn't believe in the existence of post-viral fatigue. He suggested I saw a friend of his who had treated many people with similar problems. The next day I found myself grasping my mother's hand on the steps of a

building at Bart's hospital in London, asking: "Mummy, why are we at the psychiatric unit?" I felt confused and alone. I knew there was nothing wrong with me mentally.

I attended weekly meetings with the psychiatrist for the whole of that summer. At first I hated talking to him, but after a while I turned it into a game: I would tell him one thing one minute, the opposite the next, to confuse him. But as active as my mind was, my health was not following suit. Eventually, the exhaustion did affect my mental state.

There were days when I found myself in a shop unsure of why I was there — and sometimes names of friends eluded me. I knew, though, that this confusion was a symptom, not a cause. I decided to look elsewhere for a cure.

For the next five years I tried acupuncturists, homoeopaths, hypnotherapists and cranial osteopaths. I grew impatient to get on with my life — I was at an age when being able to live independently was crucial, yet I was still relying on my mother to look after me.

My friends grew tired of my inability to join them socially. The constant feeling of flu — the aches and pains throughout my body — made it impossible to enjoy meeting people in a pub or going to parties. I felt as though I had stepped off the world and was watching it go round.

Having left school so suddenly in the spring of 1996, two years later I longed to return to my studies and gain a place at university. The exhaustion was still with me from the moment I woke to the moment I returned to bed, but I was adamant that my education would not suffer.

Studying both at home and in sixth form colleges, I returned to the books I had loved before my health faltered. But the pressure of exams was always my downfall. A cycle of studying and relapses continued for three years, until I had studied for seven A-levels without sitting any of the exams. Each time the stress levels rose and my body seemed to switch itself off, bit by bit. Slowly but surely, every bewildering symptom would reappear: the head and muscle aches, the dizziness, the nausea, the lack of concentration and the short-term memory loss.

In August 2001 I was accepted unconditionally by King's College London, to study philosophy. On my first day I arrived with excitement and anticipation after finally making it to university, albeit three years late. On the second day I walked in with a sore throat, swollen glands and a temperature. By

the third day I had been diagnosed with glandular fever, exactly six years after the first bout, and was told to take time off to recover. So far, I haven't returned.

A few weeks later my father told me about Dr Jean Monro from the Breakspear hospital in Hemel Hempstead, whom he had met through work. I phoned her immediately, went to the hospital the next day and was put through tests covering everything from food sensitivities to immune system and organ function.

Within two weeks I had been diagnosed with vitamin and mineral deficiencies, as well as a host of abnormalities in the way my immune system was functioning. I had allergies to several foods and chemicals, while the Epstein-Barr virus — which had caused the original glandular fever — was reactivating because of my low immune response. It was as though clouds had parted; for the first time in six years a doctor was telling me that she understood why I was feeling so ill.

Since then, my health has improved steadily. Relapses are rare and are usually linked to a momentary lapse when I let myself become stressed or eat some of the few foods I'm allergic to.

Recently I organised a charity film premiere to raise funds and awareness for Breakspear hospital. Jeremy Irons and Peter O'Toole came, along with Sir Richard Branson, Dougray Scott, Jemma Kidd and Esther Rantzen, whose own daughter has ME. The head of department at King's has been wonderful; she's holding my place until I feel able to go back.

I have learnt that to be well, I have to put in as much as I want to get out. I practise yoga and meditation daily and stick to a healthy diet high in protein and vegetables. I don't drink or smoke and I take a daily cocktail of vitamin and mineral supplements to strengthen my immune system. It's little price to pay for having both feet firmly back in the world once again, doing all the things I was unable to do for so long.