

I BATTLE AGAINST MY BODY

MP Andrew George suffers from a chronic form of arthritis that can leave sufferers bed bound. He tells GARETH RUBIN how he copes and why he is campaigning to get more help for others

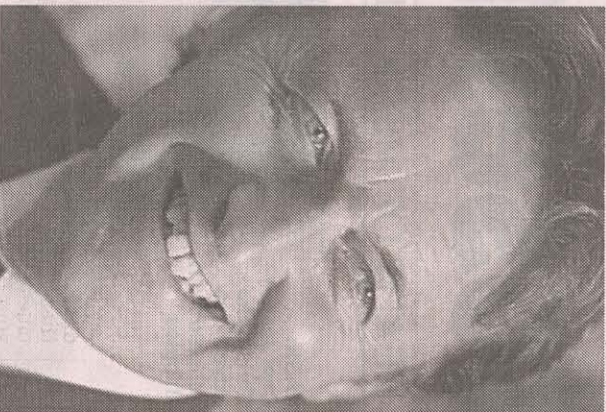
SOME days Andrew George has trouble getting out of bed in the morning. However, the MP for West Cornwall is suffering from more than the usual reluctance we all recognise. The sheer, intense pain in his back and joints at times can be enough to nearly cripple him.

Andrew suffers from ankylosing spondylitis (AS), a chronic form of arthritis that mostly affects the lower back and pelvis. It occurs as the ligaments of the lower spine become inflamed which can cause bone growth in the surrounding areas. Eventually this can result in the vertebrae fusing. Sometimes other joints may become inflamed, especially the hips, knees and ankles.

"I was 22 when I was diagnosed but this was six years after I developed the disease," he says. "Before that I had excruciating pains in my hips and also in my chest and back. At the time I was going for county trials for cricket and football and sometimes I just couldn't turn up so all my sporting ambitions came to naught and I didn't know why."

He had seen a number of specialists but none had discovered the true problem. "It was sometimes just put down to growing pains. It was only when I was at university that it was diagnosed. Once I understood what it was I could start getting my head around it and face up to the fact that it was going to affect me for the rest of my life."

That was nearly 30 years ago and since then his life has alternated between periods when he has almost



Picture: PA

PAIN: George has had AS for 30 years

forgotten about it and flare-ups of intense pain that have laid him out and stopped him working.

"It was rather scary when I first looked at the worst case scenario," he says. "Although it's down to you as well as luck as to how bad it gets. I was still mobile but had days when I needed walking sticks it was so painful. I started swimming and cycling to maintain my mobility."

While both sexes and all ages can develop AS, it most frequently appears in men in their 20s. It lasts a lifetime but modern medication can relieve or halt the symptoms. While the cause is not known, there is a genetic predisposition and around three people in every 1,000 will develop it at some point.

The main symptom is lower back pain that often spreads to the buttocks and does not improve with rest. In fact, it is often worse when trying to sleep or just after waking up. Exercise and anti-inflammatory drugs reduce the pain but in serious cases AS can cause a stooping spinal deformity or disability. However in the past two years the NHS has started providing a new class of drugs known as TNF-antagonists, which have been a big breakthrough for the worst affected.

Professor Paul Wordsworth, a

consultant rheumatologist at the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre in Oxford says: "Half of patients treated with them see a big improvement. They tell us it has given them their lives back."

Andrew is now campaigning for Government help for sufferers so they can remain active and part of the workforce rather than claiming benefits because they are in too much pain to work.

"Many patients with AS don't work or can't work in the professions for which they have been trained – all that talent, experience and training has been wasted," he explains. It is not just about supplying the drugs but also about aiding a therapeutic lifestyle. "When I first started work I couldn't afford to go swimming every day as I had been advised. I asked my GP to write to the council asking if I could get the same reduced rate that unemployed people got but he couldn't be

'Half of patients have seen a big improvement'

bothered and that needs to change. Physiotherapy is very hard to get so we need more physiotherapists."

He says employers also have a role to play, being flexible with employees with musculoskeletal conditions – otherwise many useful members of society will have their potential wasted and we will all lose out.

Andrew takes regular exercise and his long-term prognosis is quite positive. "When it's OK, I see myself as having overcome this disease but it's always there. When I get down, I just have to get mobile and get on top of it."

"It's a daily crusade against my own condition, my own body. I'm only fighting myself. Anyone who gets the condition cannot take it lying down. You have to get up and fight it. With a small amount of effort, the Government could help get sufferers back into work."

● For information on ankylosing spondylitis contact the National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society on www.nass.co.uk or 020 8948 9117.

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