Coming into the Light

Struck with diabetes during her teens, DSS member and ardent volunteer Iris Fam initially shunned all advice to managed her diabetes and landed herself in hot water years later. Now, Iris is ready to share her experience with others in the hope that they too will come out of the darkness and into the light to embrace life in spite of diabetes.

Yes, I was at the World Diabetes Day (WDD) celebration again volunteering for a cause close to my heart. It was different this year, being the first WDD observed by the United Nations. The focus last year was diabetes in the young, something that struck a chord with me.

I was diagnosed with diabetes at the age of 14 and I know only too well the overwhelming early emotions - a mixed bag of anger, denial, couldn't-care-less and even it's-no-big-deal kind of attitude. I didn't have access to the Internet then and what I knew was purely from hearsay. The information was mostly inaccurate and always grim, such as "All diabetics end up without legs", and "You need to boil your needles after each injection".

The onset of diabetes during my teenage years did not help either. I spent the next couple of years not taking care of myself. In hindsight, I think my parents were at their wit's end trying to coax me to eat properly. I went through a period of denial. I didn't want to be any different from my friends. I couldn't really care less what I had. But I learned about a teacher with diabetes in school, who eventually died from some complications because she failed to take proper care of herself. I think that shook me up a little.

At 18, during my college days, I was busy with my studies so health was not my priority. I still ate what I liked and missed my medication. Then in July 1996, almost five years after my diagnosis, I went into a diabetic coma as a result of advanced diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA). The signs were clearly there – vomiting, rapid heart rate, shallow breathing - but I chose to ignore them. I could have died but I was fortunate because my flat-mates were quick to rush me to the closest medical centre.

After the incident, I began to appreciate the folly of my obstinacy. I promised my parents I would never take my health for granted again. That same year I attended a camp and met other diabetes patients who inspired me with their tenacity to manage their condition. I also amassed all the information I could about diabetes from the Internet.

Armed with the relevant knowledge about diabetes, I realised my condition was not so daunting. With some adjustments, I could still lead a normal life. I also discovered that there are many celebrities such as Halle Berry and professional athletes who have diabetes, yet live very well.

It may have taken me a while to come out of the darkness but I am proud to say that I have seen the light and am now managing my health better. I am still learning about diabetes every day, even though I continue to have my ups and downs. But, thankfully, I am no longer lost. I joined a diabetes group which meets regularly for makan and outings. We provide support for, as well as learn from, one another.

It means a lot to me that the United Nations has now passed a landmark resolution on diabetes. It signifies great leap forward in global awareness for diabetes and the part we all must play in the battle against the rise of diabetes.

People with type 2 diabetes are over twice as likely to have a heart attack or stroke as people who do not have diabetes. In fact, people with type 2 diabetes are as likely to suffer a heart attack as people without diabetes who have already had a heart attack.

Snapshots >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>