

# Director's Message



Dear All

We once thought of autoimmunity as an inherent “confusion” in the immune system. The concept is now more subtle, and more hopeful, and I explain it as follows.

During immune system development, lymphocytes (specialised immune cells involved in specific immune responses) “go to school” at an organ in the neck called the thymus. Here, they are supposed to learn two major lessons: (1) only mount an immune response when your body delivers the inciting agent<sup>[1]</sup> “specially-packaged” by other immune cells<sup>[2]</sup>, and (2) do not react to self-structures. Most lymphocytes learn their lesson well, and actively ignore parts of our own bodies, such as skin, joints and organs. However, like any schooling system, some cells play truant, and others pay scant attention. These “mischievous” cells escape into the circulation.

Thankfully, the body has a “safety net” which deals with most of these stragglers. Left to their own devices, they would focus upon and inflame bodily targets, but we also have “regulator” components of the immune system which impose discipline and control. For reasons that haven't yet been fully clarified, these regulators sometimes also fail, leaving the mischief cells to have their way, inflaming the body in various areas. This is autoimmunity.

The good news is that, just as certain external and environmental triggers such as physical and emotional stresses can suppress normal regulator

cell function, there is a possibility of renewing and boosting the regulator cells as well, potentially restoring balance and allowing inflammation to be controlled. Usually this process of reversal or remission is not easy, but it can be done, with attention to controllable factors. Sometimes relatively simple steps will do it – walking more, relaxing more, providing more self-care. Often, medications will be required to boost the chances of achieving control. Sometimes, major life changes need to be enforced – cutting back work hours, saying “no” more often, healing relationship rifts, and so on.

Always, however, the hope of remission remains, where regulation of the immune system is restored, and medical therapies can be simplified. Meanwhile, how can you best live with your autoimmune condition? Here's a few ideas to allow a fuller life:

- Make your doctor a partner in care. The deeper implication of this is that you must take an active, rather than a passive role, in your management, not leaving everything to your carers.
- Pursue reliable information. The more you know about your condition, the better equipped you'll be to understand what's happening and why. Beware of Dr Google – only visit sites that have been validated as trustworthy by your caring team
- Invest in yourself. Part of the treatment for almost any chronic condition involves lifestyle changes. At the risk of labouring a few points that are well known to us all- health eating, exercise, weight loss, smoking cessation, stress management, good sleep hygiene – do as much of these as you can. Adoption of these steps also flows through to improved mood, which is important in dealing with the challenges of these conditions.

- Make sure your care is coordinated by someone – developing a rapport with your GP is essential to put together the pieces gathered by you, your peers and family, and the multiple specialists in your management team

Two pieces of wisdom are always worth remembering - “In this world, you will have tribulation (3)” – and, (the flip side) “This, too, shall pass (4)”. Here’s to a year of triumph over circumstances in 2014.

- 1) The substance to which your body’s immune system responds is called an “antigen” – it can be anything – an organism, a part of your own body, a drug, etc.
- 2) For an immune response to occur, antigen must be “digested” and delivered on the surface of a specialised cell, called an “antigen-presenting cell” for obvious reasons
- 3) Bible, John 16:33b
- 4) The phrase appears in a work by the Persian Sufi poet, Attar of Nishapur, who records the fable of a powerful king who asks assembled wise men to create a ring that will make him happy when he is sad, and vice versa. After deliberation the sages hand him a simple ring with the words "This too will pass" etched on it, which has the desired effect.

Best Wishes

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