



**A collection of personal stories from Veterinary Nurses suffering from a Chronic Illness or Condition.**

**A personal story by Margaret McCloud**



I qualified as a VN in 1992, working in a large, mixed practice in Northumberland. I loved my job, my friends said they were jealous because I couldn't wait to get to work every morning. I also volunteered on weekends at a local wildlife sanctuary.

In 2004, at the age of 34, I was diagnosed with 3 autoimmune conditions; Grave's disease, Rheumatoid Arthritis and Sjogren's Syndrome. I lost a lot of weight and developed a tremor. I often couldn't do fine motor skill work like suturing wounds because of the tremor, and I lost confidence in myself and my abilities. Brain fog and memory problems, along with extreme fatigue became an issue. From being a happy person with a very positive outlook on life, I became very withdrawn and bad tempered but I did not feel that I could ask for assistance from anyone. My mobility started to become an issue, with joint and muscle pains and reduced movement in my fingers. I couldn't lift heavy equipment; I could no longer be on my feet for 8+ hours a day. I was increasingly fatigued and work became a real struggle. My world was getting smaller every day. I had zero confidence in myself. With hindsight this was obviously a symptom of the disease process and if I had asked, I am confident that I would have been supported by my colleagues to continue to work with modified duties.

With chronic illness and pain, it's not an option to show how much we are hurting. We hide it so well, often making ourselves more unwell in the process. A person with chronic pain will learn how to deal with it but this is not always possible. Acute flare-ups can occur in a fraction of a second. and suddenly we can't complete the task we were doing. It's hard to see yourself as a valuable team member or as a competent worker when this happens. With chronic autoimmune diseases, things like a common cold take a lot out of us and recovery time is often a drawn-out process – our bodies are constantly fighting against themselves.

**My message to those working with a diagnosis of chronic illness is;**

- Talk to your employer and disclose your diagnoses, let them know what they can do to help you to continue to work safely and confidently.
- Ask for help from your colleagues, modify working protocols where possible.
- Explore other career opportunities within your workplace.
- Don't make yourself more unwell by trying to work through a flare up of your condition(s)
- Remember that it may take a while to get a treatment regime that works for you.
- Keep your health professionals updated with any difficulties that you are having, and if you have an Occupational Health team, use them.
- If you do leave practice, remember that as a Veterinary Nurse, you are equipped with a plethora of desirable transferable skills. I now work as Admin for the NHS.
- You are a valuable member of the team, whatever your role.
- If you work with a colleague who is struggling with chronic illness, please remember to be kind. If we say that we cannot do a task either in the short term or longer term due to pain, fatigue, loss of confidence, then look for ways that you can help your colleague. Sometimes, just a friendly face to talk to when we're struggling is a massive help to us.
- Remember that we're there because we love our job and we want to work; we're not shirking if we say we're unwell.

