

FROM PURPLE TOES TO THE BOX – an im-patient eczema journey.

Once upon a time – but no, this is not a fairy story – this really happened. A long time ago as a little girl with eczema, when my feet got ‘bad’ they were treated with gentian violet. They looked pretty ‘gothic’, though I did not appreciate the kudos this might have now. This hardened into a wondrous purple shell which then cracked off, leaving very tender skin underneath: I dread to think how those in the trenches got on.

A worry to my long-suffering parents, I was doubtless also a pain to my sister, who may well have felt that all attention was focussed on me. As parents will, mine tried all sorts of things. Cold baths, cold-water bandages, even starch bandages. The bandages were fine for a short time, but they dried out quickly and then started to itch. The cold baths were no fun, but the reward was a diet of cottage cheese and new potatoes with (it was during the war) BUTTER! Fortunately it was summertime!

When tar ointment came in, I do not know, but I was reliant on it well into my working days in the 1960s. By this time it was improved by the addition of cetomacragol, which made it more spreadable, as in today’s butter! It could be a great relief, but diabolical to get out of clothes. Everything went khaki, and it was not even wartime! I was dependent on launderettes, with no knowledge then of the hazards of biological powders. To hand-wash was not a sensible option since even trying to rub a collar made holes in fingers.

Other memories of the 1950/60s are of oral steroids and sleeping pills: the latter notoriously unhelpful when trying to get to work on time. Oral steroids kept me going, though with unwanted side effects. The sudden withdrawal of these in the 1950s led straight to hospital. That was an experience best described as ‘historic’. The regime was fearsome: bath before 7 am, and positively no emollients before the ‘Consultant’s Round’: sometime between 11.30 am & noon. In discreetly screened isolation, we waited with pieces of cotton, known as ‘fig-leaves’ over our ‘modesty’, and we waited..... Some of us, who could be up the wall in 20 minutes without any creams, learnt to secrete small, and illicit, supplies of cream to keep us sane in the interim. Understandably, but agonisingly, the children’s dressings were done first, so, again, we waited.....

Do you remember having corrugated-cardboard splints on the arms to prevent scratching? I had them as a child. This ward did not require, but offered this, and for arms to be tied to the bed to avoid doing damage during the night. I welcomed this, until one morning a nurse thought it a joke not to untie me, and pass with the tea, saying my ‘hand was not up’. From my response, she realised it was not such a good joke!

Nowadays, even many flowers are banned from skin wards. Unthinkable now, there was a resident WARD CAT! The dermatologist told me of the new theory about the itch/scratch cycle, but the presence of the cat suggests that the

application of the theory was patchy: more directed to 'Do not scratch' than finding causes.

Welcome then to wonderful topical steroids in the 1980s. But it was only in the early 1990s, after a particular flare-up, that a dermatologist asked me if I knew about the different strengths of steroid preparations. Though I already had a rainbow collection of tubes, I did not. The explanation made useful sense to me, trying to manage my eczema with any kind of competence. Would that everyone, today, was routinely given this basic information by their GP.

Then, ah yes, I was introduced to impregnated bandages. (Have you noticed that 'ichthopaste' is uniformly called 'itchypaste'?) I had Quinaband. Applying this and two extra layers, was messy but comforting and effective. At home I learnt to cut the strips in advance, ready to apply, and eventually could do arms and feet in 20 minutes. (Is this a record?) However, I must confess that it took longer to admit that this had to be done: I sometimes asked a friend 'up for coffee' while I got on with that first go. There was also, of course, the consultant who suggested that I quinaband my back...I wonder ...!?! Fortunately, my skin is now much better behaved - and/or better managed. But I wonder if those using the newer wet-wraps have the same battle with themselves before getting on with it? Pleasanter, I think, but still a palaver.

The 1990s flare also led to PUVA. Wearing the dark UV protective glasses, colleagues wondered what I had been up to the night before, but, lucky me, my eczema cleared 'like snow off a dyke'. The Miracle Box! Treatments lasted longer then, suggesting that one should make use of the 20 minutes or so. This led to thuds and bangs. 'Whatever are you doing in there??' Thud. 'Just exercises..' Bang. Now, with my UVB start time of some 27 seconds, there is not much time for exercises!

I am immensely grateful for improved treatments over the years, and for help, mostly from the NES, learning to manage my delinquent skin.

Looking ahead, the recent genetic discoveries may prove a great breakthrough, so there may still be a happy ending.

Some journey, much progress!