

## AND SOME PLAY TUNES...!

**Once upon a time...** ‘We must remember’, she said, ‘that the skin is an ORGAN’. Well, even if you are not sitting comfortably - and most folk with itchy skin do not - I will begin again.

Once upon a time, as a young medical social work student, I was sitting in undue deference with my tutor, as she delivered this weighty wisdom. *‘The skin is an organ’* ... I had no idea how I was expected to respond. Yes, I knew all too much about that particular organ! After twenty or so years of eczema, I already knew that the skin weighs a considerable 11lbs.or so. Organ or no, all too often it seemed that every milligram of that 11 lbs. decided to play in concert – but in a decidedly discordant and irritating performance! Some organ!

I was an itchy and blotchy student and probably presented a problem. What did my clients think when I automatically scratched during an interview? I suspect this nearly failed me my course.

Having over the years learnt more about myself, and also much about skin management from the NES, I began to wonder what we can learn from this notion of an ill-behaved organ which can plague us so... Can we learn to live more harmoniously with it?

We are only rarely NOT aware of our skin, whether actively itching or no. Often we resent it; we try to hide both it and from it. Years of trying to hide our eczema, and thereby ourselves, from our work colleagues and others does little for our self-esteem.

We usually feel tremendous guilt about scratching and because, we are ‘just making it worse’, as often reminded by well-meaning others. Do they realise that the resultant pain is more acceptable than the itch?

Some with eczema believe it is ‘all their fault for scratching’ and do not regard eczema as a ‘proper illness’ – perhaps just a rather nasty habit. If hearts, ears and other bits of us need understanding and help, why not skin?

We need to try to understand ourselves as well as the illness. Some suggest that we are ‘taking things out on ourselves’. OK: so what are these ‘things’? - feelings, usually, eg. fear of bringing more problems upon ourselves. If so, there may be better ways than scratching of sorting out our feelings, if only we can find them!

I had to learn that I was a more sensitive person than I thought. This meant that if I started scratching suddenly I had to try to think – ‘and what has *irritated* you just now?’ Was I hurt, angry, confused or feeling helpless – or just plain exhausted? When I could pin down what it was, I could sometimes find that ‘better way’. Sometimes this meant I had to risk telling someone how I felt....

Some feel that paying attention to our skin’s demands is giving in to it. Over the years I have learnt to recognise when my eczema has been telling me to slow

down. Now, two days trying to do this usually pays dividends. Is this 'giving in' or learning to live in some kind of practical accommodation with it?

The diligence of a Sherlock Holmes is also needed to identify things that help or hinder. We may struggle to have enough opportunity to try out different treatment preparations, but we can be watchful about foods and things we come in contact with. This 'paying attention' and working out an effective daily management regime is vital - however tedious!

This brings me back to organs – or rather the piano.

Trying in advanced years to play the piano, I realise that a degree of practice and mutual respect between me and the piano is needed if something acceptably tuneful is to result! Learning how to live in better harmony with our skin is not easy but, like playing the piano, encouragement, knowledge, understanding and daily practice all pay dividends!

The best fairy stories have a happy ending: here's hoping!

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