

Ten Years Later, Air Force Major Learns Cause For Chronic Illness

(NAPSA)—In many ways, Kate McGraw is an extraordinary woman. She is a United States Air Force major, a Ph.D. clinical psychologist, an accomplished fencer and a mother of three.

Yet, in other ways, McGraw couldn't be more "one of the girls." She is one of 30 million American women who suffer from an autoimmune disease (AD). Like many of those women, she spent 10 years trying to get a diagnosis.

In 1989, after giving birth to her first child, McGraw says she had difficulties with coordination, memory and concentration that seemed to worsen when she exercised. This was followed by years marked by illness—pneumonia, vertigo, vomiting, hair loss, rashes and skin infections, oral and nasal ulcers. While she visited multiple specialists and underwent major medical testing, the only thing doctors said they could find was a sleep disorder.

At that point, McGraw recalls "I gave up the search in frustration, assumed I was okay and convinced myself that my symptoms were stress-related and that I could overcome them with good stress management, diet and exercise."


According to Virginia Ladd, executive director, American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association (AARDA), Kate McGraw's experience is a familiar one.

"Since the women affected by autoimmune disease are mostly young and in their childbearing years, a time when they are traditionally most healthy, getting a diagnosis can prove to be extremely difficult."

ADs all share the same underlying cause—autoimmunity. It is the process whereby the immune system mistakenly recognizes the body's own proteins as foreign

Tips For Getting An Autoimmune Diagnosis

The American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association recommends:

- **Know your family's medical history.** Genetics plays a role in autoimmune disease (AD). If one family member has lupus, another may have scleroderma and another may have Hashimoto's thyroiditis.
- **Keep a list of symptoms for the doctor.** Often people with AD suffer symptoms that seem unrelated but may not be.
- **Don't be afraid to get a second, third or fourth opinion.** Doctors are not always knowledgeable about ADs. If a doctor dismisses symptoms or says they are stress-related, find another doctor.
- **Go online.** The Internet provides resources to research these diseases, find specialists and share experiences. 

invaders and begins producing antibodies that attack healthy cells and tissues, causing a variety of diseases. There are more than 80 known and another 40 suspected ADs, including multiple sclerosis, type-1 diabetes, Graves' disease, rheumatoid arthritis, autoimmune hepatitis and Sjögren's disease.

"Another factor that makes diagnosis so difficult is that symptoms vary widely," said Ladd. "And, because autoimmune diseases affect multiple systems, their symptoms are misleading, often hindering an accurate diagnosis."

After convincing herself that she could manage her symptoms, McGraw enrolled in the clinical psychology doctorate program at the University of Texas' Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, became pregnant with her

second child and began fencing competitively.

Yet she continued to be plagued by ill health. When she woke-up one morning with severe weakness on her left side, McGraw decided it was time once again to investigate.

Referred by a friend to a rheumatologist, McGraw's mystery illness began to unravel. Initially, the doctor diagnosed her with Primary Antiphospholipid Antibody Syndrome. In this disease, antibodies react against phospholipids (a type of fat), which make up the outside walls of all the body's cells. She was placed on the blood-thinning medication Coumadin.

After follow-up consultations, another diagnosis was arrived at: Mixed Connective Tissue Disease, an autoimmune disease which has an overlap of symptoms and manifestations of several connective tissue disorders.

Most recently, McGraw tested positive for Celiac disease. An autoimmune illness where the body develops antibodies against gluten, a protein found in wheat, Celiac disease can lead to malnutrition, as well as destruction of the lining of the small intestine. The only treatment is to eliminate wheat/gluten from her diet.

But, McGraw remains positive.

"The important thing is that the various treatments keep working and I get to continue living my life to its fullest."

AARDA is the nation's only organization dedicated to bringing a national focus to autoimmunity as a disease category and supporting collaborative research in order to find better treatments and a cure for all ADs. For more information, please visit AARDA's web site at www.aarda.org.