

#ThisIsJIA by Helen Stanier

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Being so young, I do not remember my initial diagnosis, but my parents took me to the GP because my right knee was hot and swollen, I had difficulty walking and I cried a lot. Thankfully, the doctor diagnosed me quite quickly with JIA and referred me to a rheumatologist. Unfortunately, in the 1980s

there were limited treatment options available, and my JIA quickly developed to affect all my joints by around aged 12. My earliest memories of having JIA were unpleasant: horrible tasting tablets, uncomfortable night splints, and frequent visits to the hospital, either to see the rheumatologist, who was tall and intimidating, or to have procedures done such as draining fluid from my knee. But I also have fond memories of my amazing physiotherapist, Maggie, whom I saw every week until I was 16 years old, and her lovely rocking horse in the waiting room at the children's centre.

I am fortunate that my diagnosis was quick, and shortly after being referred to the local rheumatologist, I went to see the leading expert in JIA at the time, Barbara Ansel, in Leeds. As well as receiving local care, I continued to go to her clinic annually throughout my childhood. A major turning point for me was when I attended a residential activity week run by a young people's arthritis charity at age 14. This was the first time I had ever met anyone else with JIA. I found out that I wasn't alone, and I met other children going through the same things as me. It gave me so much more confidence and helped me to accept my JIA. I would strongly encourage anyone with JIA to try to meet other people with the condition if they possibly can.

There was limited medication for JIA when I was a child, but in my early twenties, I was among the first people to be prescribed biologic, Abulimubab (Humira). This, along with a bilateral hip replacement in my twenties, was a huge turning point for me and my JIA, and reduced my joint pain and swelling significantly.

Being a farmer can be very physical, but I have taken on jobs on the farm that I can manage, such as feeding young calves, helping milk the cows, managing our team of staff, and doing the paperwork. I find being outdoors every day and as active as possible really helps reduce my pain and stiffness, and spending time with the animals aids my mental health so much as well. Even on days when my JIA is bad, I still try to go outside for a little while and do a few jobs. I have found ways around some physical tasks, such as using a cart for moving heavier items or installing wheels on the bottom of gates. There are of course things that I can't do or would be dangerous for me to do, but the whole team works together to get everything done.

My JIA is quite visible and there will always be pre-conceptions especially from those who don't know me. I still get sales reps asking to speak to my dad, assuming he manages the farm day-to-day, but I now find this quite funny. I have a can-do attitude and hopefully by now the people that matter know I am capable. My JIA is also still very much active and affects me daily, although my medication is fantastic at keeping flares to a minimum. Unfortunately, I suffered a lot of joint damage when I was younger – around 15 years ago, I had my elbows replaced at Wrightington hospital and I am likely to need more replacement surgery in the future. That's why keeping active is so important to me, and I hope to be farming for many more years to come.

My advice to those living with JIA or another rheumatic condition, would be to never let anyone tell you that you can't do it, fight for what you need medically, and ask for help when you need it. Living with JIA is hard, and it will have a massive impact on everything in your life, but it is just part of you, and, with the right support, you will be able to achieve anything you want to do.

These days, the agricultural industry is a much more inclusive sector in which to work. Farms and the wider industry use so much technology that make many physical jobs easier and more efficient but there are also many exciting, rewarding, non-physical career paths available. I think many of the characteristics of a person with an arthritic condition such as determination, problem solving, and

empathy are exactly those required and valued in farming.

So finally, I can say with confidence to anyone considering this industry, you can absolutely follow a dream to work in agriculture with JIA/RA.