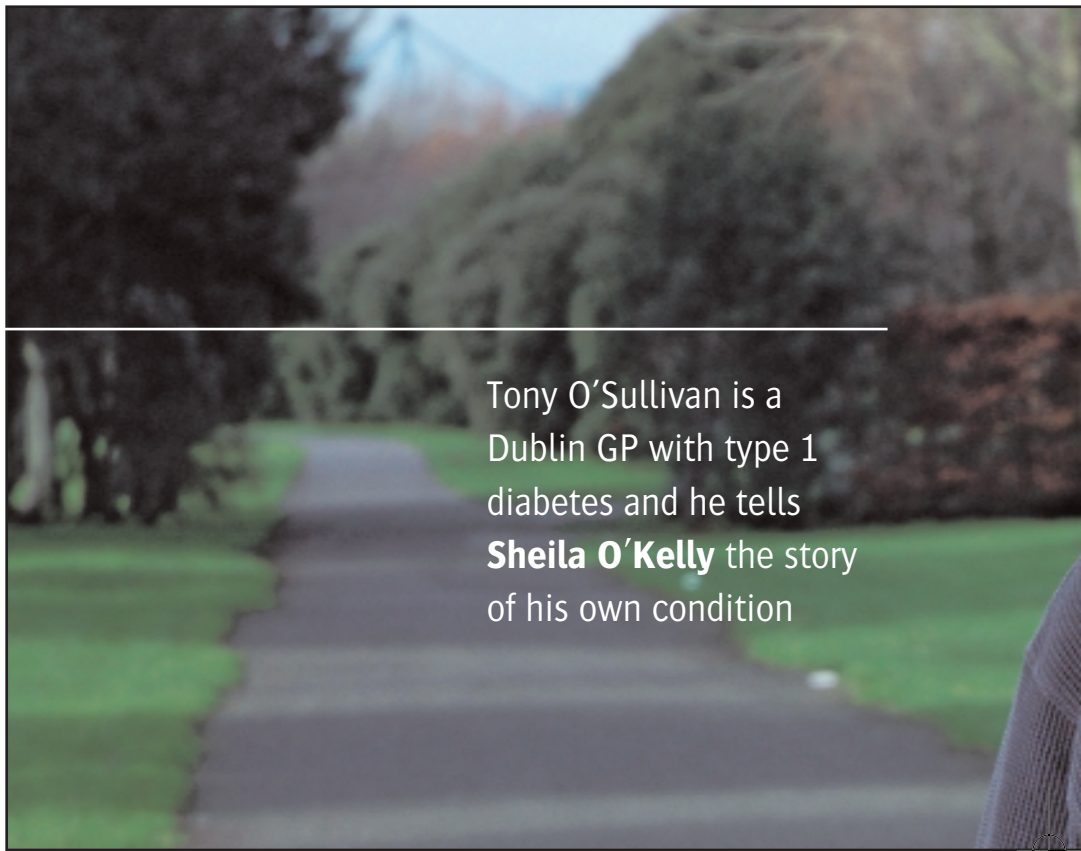


[INTERVIEW]



Tony O'Sullivan is a Dublin GP with type 1 diabetes and he tells **Sheila O'Kelly** the story of his own condition

From boiled-up needles to 24-hour pump

Tony O'Sullivan is best known for his Trojan work as a Federation volunteer, but he is also a GP who has type 1 diabetes.

Tony was 15 years old and at boarding school when he was diagnosed. If the pupils slept it out for more than three mornings they got detention. By the time the school nurse twigged why Tony was so tired all the time, he had built up 30 detentions.

Tony was in hospital for a week after he was diagnosed. "The only information given to me was a medical textbook that told me my life expectancy was 40 years old," Tony recalls.

The treatment at the time was animal insulins administered with a glass syringe. There was no such thing as home blood tests.

"I tested my urine by dropping in a tablet that fizzed up like a volcano and it always came out orange indicating a high blood sugar.

"There was never any attempt to match my insulin with my lifestyle or activities. So they gradually increased my insulin until I started having hypos. I have a scar on my chin from when I collapsed in the breakfast queue at school.

"They used to give me one new needle

[INTERVIEW]



Photo: Sonja Storm

every month and I boiled that needle once a week. That hardens you. Most people don't realise how lucky we are now because of the technical improvements.

"I was an oddity but it created interest in the school and I didn't have any problems coming to terms with it. I continued to play a lot of rugby, tennis, football and I went hill walking," said Tony.

Science and maths were Tony's strongest points and while early on he was interested in medicine, he never thought of becoming a specialist in diabetes.

For a long time in college Tony took very little notice of his diabetes other than taking insulin regularly. At that time most people managed their diabetes by keeping their blood sugar above a certain level.

"Those who aimed to keep their blood sugar low were the heroes. The only testing equipment and medication available at the time meant that they were at a high risk of having hypos. The insulin then was not finely tuned like it is today," said Tony.

People will always fall off the model of good control at some periods in their lives, said

Tony. But there should be plenty of opportunities, for young people especially, to re-establish good control.

"We need forgiveness and reconciliation!" said Tony.

"The finger-pricking equipment that is available now is fantastic. The first type of finger-pricking equipment I got in about 1978 had a guillotine and a huge needle with big spring. Things have come on a lot since then."

Now people have:

- Disposable syringes
- Finer, smaller, shorter needles
- Blood glucose testing – small portable devices
- Different insulins
- Insulin pens
- Pumps.

Medical school

While you might expect that a student with diabetes at medical school would receive a certain amount of understanding, this was not Tony's experience.

"As students and as junior doctors we were

immersed in this high tensile world where time was of no importance and your well-being did not matter.

"If you were not collapsing at the end of the day you were regarded as 'not being up for it'. There I was, taking mixed insulin doses that predetermined when I needed to eat and then I would not get to eat that meal. I had quite a few hypos, but funnily I never thought of becoming a diabetes specialist," said Tony.

Shortly after he finished medical school the insulin pen and human insulin became available. Nowadays, Tony also uses an insulin pump.

Tony said it was now easier to fit his own diabetes care in around his job as a busy GP, teaching, being on committees and being president of the International Diabetes Federation (Europe).

"I can test as often as I like and I can adjust my insulin pump. I can go on as long as necessary without eating because of the basal level [the insulin delivered by the pump every few minutes right throughout the day] in the pump. And things like night duty are no longer a problem," Tony said.

He does a lot of minor surgery and he is very careful to be well prepared so that he won't have a hypo during the procedure.

"I have never had a problem yet."

Diabetes education

Tony sat through one of the week-long DAFNE diabetes education courses (Dose Adjustment For Normal Eating) as an observer and found it very helpful. It did make him worry, that while there was no other family history of diabetes in his family, that the risk for his children was reasonably high.

"It would not have stopped me having children. And anyone whose child develops diabetes now should be optimistic about the developments over the next 30 year."

He and his wife Caitriona have three children Aisling 14; Maeve 12, and Niall 10. The two girls walk to school and Caitriona cycles with Niall. They also go hill walking along the Wicklow Way.

Lifestyle

Tony believes in practising what he preaches and he cycles from his home in Dundrum to his practice in Irishtown. He also swims once or twice a week, and goes hill walking.