

I ACHE IN THE PLACES WHERE I USED TO PLAY

"Pain in the buttocks?"

"Well, yes. And my back. And my hip. And ..."

I'm lying on my on my back on a particularly uncomfortable examining table under a particularly unflattering fluorescent light.

Bob (not his real name) gently raises my leg ...

"OK, Doug, (my real name) tell me when this starts to ..."

"Aaaaahh!!"

" ... hurt. Already? Sorry. Doug, you're pretty debilitated."

No kidding. Bob is a physiotherapist with a talent for stating the obvious. I'd hobbled into his office grimacing and leaning on a cane.

"And your hip joints are like cement."

"Is that good?"

"That's bad. But the good news is I don't think it's a disk. I think it's your piriformis."

"My what?"

"Don't worry. Give it six weeks and we can fix you up. I just want to check something else. Tell me if it ..."

"Aaaaaahh!!"

Yes. It hurts. In a previous column I talked about what I called the Four Horsemen of the Aging Apocalypse -- namely memory loss, aches and pains, hearing difficulties - and Netflix addiction. The last one was obviously a bit of a joke - but I needed four. And who wants to talk about death or taxes? That column focussed on memory issues (if I remember correctly) so "aches and pains" is next on the list. It probably should have been first.

While aches and pains are obviously not an exclusively male thing, men do seem to talk about them more. Women might say (with some justification?) that men are just babies who moan and groan about every little pang or twinge as if it merits an outpouring of sympathy and an immediate trip to emergency, while women have the fortitude and good grace to suffer in silence and not burden everyone with news about their latest bodily complaint. But men go on about their latest visit to their chiropractor, their physiotherapist, their acupuncturist, their osteopath, their latest hip/knee/you-name-it replacement as if it's the most fascinating subject on the planet.

We go through life with most encounters beginning with a pro forma exchange: "How are you?" followed by "Fine." It's just filler, a conversation starter. It's not meant as a deep and probing question. But I think there's a tipping point, a fateful age when someone says "How are you?" and you actually ANSWER. You start listing your aches and pains and pending medical appointments as if they're Breaking News on CNN. And you realize that a line has been crossed. You've reached the banks of the River Styx, a netherworld, where "detailed ailment updates" and "chiropractor recommendations" have joined the weather, sports and even politics as acceptable topics for discussion in polite society. Emily Post's sixth rule of dinner party etiquette was - "Don't talk about your health (particularly if it's bad.)" But Emily is long gone, her rules forgotten or ignored (but that's another column.)

Unfortunately, whether we whine about them or bear them in stoic silence, aches and pains are very real, and ever more real with each passing year. And Pain Management is a huge business. A quick check of the Kingston Yellow Pages reveals 94 listings for physiotherapy, acupuncture, chiropractic and massage clinics.

This doesn't include more arcane (to me) treatments like TENS, reiki healing, biofeedback, therapeutic touch and many more. Not to mention a plethora of pain relieving pills, herbal remedies, ointments, creams and contraptions from magnetic copper bracelets to countless back, spine and hip supports, belts, braces and, well, girdles (although they don't call them that) - all "clinically proven" of course. And that's just the tip of the pain management iceberg. If you Google "Pain Treatment" no fewer than 1,080,000,000 results come up. Yes, you read that correctly. Over one billion.

I've heard that the ability to feel pain is one thing that makes us human, that distinguishes us from robots. Pain is actually one of nature's gifts. It causes us to recoil from the touch of a hot stove, helps us to minimize the risk of injury. But it sure doesn't feel like much of a gift when aching knees are keeping you awake at night.

It's one thing if you have an actual injury, a fall, a twisted ankle - or worse. Then the resulting pain is explicable. And presumably the injury will heal and the pain will go away. Eventually. But what about those mysterious pains that just pop up, unbidden, out of nowhere - when you wake up? Or stand up? They don't seem to have any obvious cause. Or wait. Maybe they do. It's called age.

Half the people I play tennis with seem to either have had a knee or hip replacement - or are waiting for one (or a second one) - or are wearing various braces or supports to avoid having one. I'm sure they'd agree with Leonard Cohen when he famously said "I ache in the places where I used to play" - (although I don't think he was talking about tennis.) I assume my friends aren't quite ready yet to agree with James Taylor when he said "My body's aching and my time is at hand." I checked and he wrote that when he was 22 so what did he know about aching

bodies?" But he's still singing Fire and Rain 50 years later. Maybe he has a more visceral understanding of it now that he has 70-year-old knees.

I was talking to a friend on Zoom recently whom, what with a certain pandemic, I hadn't seen in several months. His first question was "How are your knees?" Not "How are things?" Or even "How are you?" But "How are your knees?" And, in fact, I had had a knee issue but he didn't know that. He just assumed I wouldn't have been able get through the intervening months without a knee issue, or a back issue, or a physical issue of some sort. It just goes with the territory - the territory called age.

And he was right. Weeks earlier I'd woken up with an intensely painful left knee. It was visibly swollen so it resembled half a tennis ball. (Well, a third of a tennis ball. No need to exaggerate.) I hadn't strained it or twisted it that I'd noticed. I guess I'd made the mistake of going to sleep. It was diagnosed by my latest friendly physio Tim (not his real name) as a strained sartorius muscle which connects to something called the pes anserine (also called the "goose foot" - but I'm sure you knew that.) And you have to wonder how many muscles and tendons and ligaments and nerve ends with Latin names that we've never heard of are lurking in darkness inside our bodies waiting to strike, waiting to cause us grief? In any event, Tim assured me that in six weeks or so we'd get it sorted out. And we did. Pretty much. I still feel an occasional twinge in my knee but Tim said that's to be expected. "We don't heal as fast when we're OLDER, Doug." Thanks for pointing that out, Tim.

On another occasion, again seemingly out of nowhere - (are we beginning to sense a pattern?) - I developed a weird pain in my shoulders which made it almost impossible to raise my arms over my head. Tests revealed it was something called polymyalgia which could be treated with a course of low dose steroids.

Luckily there's no drug testing at the Kingston Tennis Club and I continued to try to play, although reaching up to serve was a challenge. One evening when my playing partner arrived I asked how he was doing and he replied (true story) "I've just been diagnosed with something you've probably never heard of. It's called polymyalgia." So we held up the game while we stood there talking, not about forehands and backhands, but about the frequency and doses of our steroid regimens. Polymyalgia roughly translates as "pain everywhere." Maybe when you reach a certain age "pain everywhere" is just a synonym for the human condition.

On another occasion three or four years ago (when I was but a youngster) I ran into a friend on the street in Gananoque. We sat down at a bench in the Town Park to catch up. When it was time to go I stood up and suddenly doubled over with excruciating pain in my lower back. I could barely walk across the street to my car. I'd felt perfectly fine when I sat down. Again, it just came out of nowhere.

We had planned a dinner party for that night and I couldn't even stand to greet our guests or serve drinks. I only seemed to get some relief when I was sitting. So, ever the good host, I was reduced to plopping myself in the corner and listening to each new arrival say "What's the matter with Doug?"

The next morning my wife found a physiotherapy clinic which could fit me in on short notice. And that led to the scene that began this column, with me hobbling in to see Bob (still not his real name) which led to his diagnosis of Piriformis Syndrome.

And, with a combination of ultrasound and acupuncture and exercise, Bob got me and my piriformis working relatively painlessly again within the promised six weeks. Bob also said "Try not to sit so much. Sitting is 'the new smoking'. Your piriformis doesn't like it." Maybe I should get one of those stand-up desks and never sit down. But it sounds exhausting.

And I still don't know exactly what my piriformis is or what its function is. I just know that if it gets out of sorts it can bring you to your knees. So from time to time I still do one of the stretches Bob gave me to keep my piriformis happy. But who knows when that sneaky little devil may raise its nasty head again and make my life miserable.

Attentive readers may notice that I've mentioned six weeks a few times and, indeed, six weeks seems like some sort of magical number in the pain management world. I have a friend Steve (definitely not his real name) who's a retired physiotherapist. Oddly, given his profession, he doesn't recommend going to a physio - or a doctor or other medical professional - for every ache or pain. His mantra is "Don't medicalize pain. Wait six weeks and it will usually go away. The body will heal itself." (Isn't this heresy in the pain management community? I wonder.)

And it may be true. The problem is that even if Pain A has subsided over six weeks, that's plenty of time for Pain B to pop up somewhere else. That pain in my left knee seems to be getting better, but wait ... what's that twinge in my right hip? Maybe it's just Murphy's Law in action: "If anything can go wrong, it will." And, as someone said, "Murphy was an optimist."

So we're left with the question - do any of these billion treatments or remedies or devices actually work? Over the years I've gone to physiotherapists, doctors, an osteopath, more physiotherapists for my left knee, right knee, tennis elbow, lower back pain, upper back pain, tennis elbow (again), torn quadricep, painful shoulders, sore wrist, back pain (again) and the notorious "pain everywhere". Without exception the people I saw were knowledgeable, concerned, dedicated to helping me. And in most cases the pain subsided or went away completely (well, my knee's still a little sore. Sorry, Tim.) But did the

treatments actually make a difference? Or, like Steve says, would my body have healed itself without help? Who knows.

What I do know is the next time my (insert Latin name here) acts up I doubt that I'll have the fortitude to silently grit my teeth and wait it out for six weeks. When anyone asks "How are you?" I'll say "TERRIBLE!" and go looking for a magic balm. Somewhere.

In the meantime I'll try not to sit so much.

"So, Doug. How's the knee?" asks Tim.

"It's coming along - but my back is bothering me. Again."

"Right. Murphy's Law."

"I saw a reflection in a window the other day and for a second I thought 'Look at that hunched over person'. Then I realized -- oh wait. It's me."

"Well, I'm sure we can get you straightened up."

"In six weeks?"

"Sounds about right. Just let me check your range of motion ... Wow, Doug. Your hips are like ..."

"Cement?"

"Exactly. Tell me if this starts to --"

"Aaaaaagh!"

Yes, Tim. It hurts.

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Doug Bowie is a playwright and screenwriter who lives (and sometimes moans and groans) in Kingston

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