'I can take delight in MY SKIN now'

Psoriasis had blighted Jean Knights' life since childhood, but she has finally found an effective treatment to keep it at bay

For almost as long as she can remember Jean Knights has felt different from other people – ashamed of how her body looks and embarrassed by the reaction she gets when she meets someone for first time. This summer will be different. 'I'm looking forward to getting my legs out and wearing shorter skirts,' she laughs.

It's taken until the age of 69 for Knights, from Guildford in Surrey, to feel confident about wearing anything other than ankle-length skirts and long-sleeved tops.

Since the age of seven she has suffered from psoriasis, a condition that affects more than a million people in the UK and which causes red crusty patches on the skin, covered by silvery scales.

It is physically painful and itchy but can also cause deep psychological scars for sufferers, as Knights, a psychotherapist, knows only too well.

'All the talk now is about coronavirus but I have been using the same language all my life to talk about myself,' she says. 'I have felt contagious – as though I am a threat to others even though psoriasis isn't infectious. People look at you in a certain way – they are wary of you. It's a horrible way to live.'

For Knights, the problem started when she was sent to boarding school in South Africa. 'I developed these red, itchy patches on my scalp, elbows and knees and they were very obvious.

'I wasn't given a name for what I had then; I was just made to feel different from everyone else. It's the little things – on hair-washing night at school I had to stand in a different line from everyone else, and my hair was slathered in this horrible gunge.

'My teenage years were even worse – of course everyone is uncomfortable in their bodies at that point, but it was really difficult for me. I felt like a freak.'

Knights was finally given a diagnosis in her teens but the various potions, lotions and creams (even injections directly into her scalp) would only offer temporary relief and were sometimes no help at all.

Her father worked in the oil industry and the family moved repeatedly – Knights had lived in 18 countries by the time she was an adult.

At the age of 18 she moved to London and met her husband, but her wedding day was also marred by psoriasis. 'Certainly, for me, warmer climates do seem to help, and being in colder and wetter London led to a flare-up,' she says.

> *'Some people become suicidal because it's a dreadful way to live'*

Jean aged 18, before psoriasis affected her face

'At one point it was so bad I was in hospital, wrapped in bandages and covered in lotion. I felt like I was mummified. You just want to scratch at the plaques [the patches of affected skin] all the time.

'I didn't want my husband to see me like that – I even told the nurses not to let him visit, but he was amazing. He arrived with flowers and made me feel better. He has been extraordinarily patient and wonderful throughout all of this.'

Psoriasis is a chronic, auto-immune disease. Sufferers can have periods of relatively few symptoms followed by devastating flare-ups.

For Knights, these were often associated with stress in her life, including shortly after the birth of her first daughter, when she was living in Nigeria and her husband was working abroad. Another was when her now-adult daughter was pregnant, and then developed a rare eye cancer.

For years Knights had managed to cover up the condition by wearing long skirts, leggings and long-sleeved tops but then, six years ago, the psoriasis spread to her face.

'You get treated like you are a leper,' she says. 'It is a very isolating condition. Some people become suicidal because it's a dreadful way to live – managing it can feel like a full-time job.'

Dietary changes have helped – eliminating alcohol, tomatoes and onions has proved effective for Knights – as well as yoga, Pilates and meditation.

Prescription medications such as steroid creams offered temporary relief but as Knights points out, they also thin the skin, which can ultimately exacerbate the problem.

But the biggest change for her has been a treatment called Soratinex, sold by a small UK company. It's a three-step regimen consisting of a gel, a cream, and an oil. It is not currently available on the NHS but costs around £120 for the first package and is a combination of natural creams, gels and oils.

'You have to be dedicated about putting it on but it has worked for me,' Knights says. 'I have this huge sense of gratitude because for the first time I can take delight in my skin and feel normal. I have carried this self-loathing with me all my life but psoriasis has also been my greatest teacher, about me and my body.' ■

PSORIASIS: THE FACTS

Psoriasis affects more than a million people in the UK, men and women equally. It is associated with an increased production of skin cells and while the process is not fully understood, is thought to be linked to the immune system. The condition can run in families, although the genetic connection is still being investigated.

Diagnosis is normally made by a GP before referral to a specialist.Treatments can include vitamin D creams, steroids and controlled exposure to UV light, called phototherapy.

For more information:

- *nhs.uk/conditions/psoriasis*
- *psoriasis-association.org.uk*
- *franklpharma.co.uk*