A miracle diagnosis

Carol Jackson told DAPHNE OLIVIER how a Pietermaritzburg doctor’s diagnosis of Rickettsia ended a 32-year nightmare of illness

THERE had been warnings — difficulty in climbing steps and unusual tiredness — but it wasn’t until I woke up one morning in 1974 and found myself so weak that I could hardly get out of bed, that I realised something was very seriously wrong with my health.

As we were living in Zambia at the time, the first doctor I turned to for help was an orthopaedic surgeon in Lusaka. After a series of tests he referred me to a neurologist in Chiswick, where I underwent more tests, including a myelogram.

He revealed a crumpled spinal disc and I subsequently underwent an operation to remove the disc.

I was hopeful that this operation would sort out my problem, so it came as a bitter disappointment to find that my symptoms did not go away. I recovered from the operation but still felt extremely weak, and walking, even a short distance, became more and more difficult.

To make matters worse, I was unable to concentrate and the tremor in my hands made it impossible to write. My joints ached. There were times when my voice failed and I was unable to speak. I was a wreck. It was no wonder I began to feel depressed.

From then on things seemed to spiral out of control. Walking on tracks, I went from a neurologist to a physician to a gynaecologist to a psychiatrist. I was taking a battery of medicines, including yet another antibiotic. The results were all negative.

My darkest moment came when a physician told me that the problem was in my head and that there was nothing physically wrong with me. I knew beyond doubt that my symptoms were not imaginary, but it was hard to make myself feel otherwise.

Desperation sent me to a neurologist in Durban, who told me that I was possibly suffering from multiple sclerosis.

In 1986 I travelled to the UK and was admitted into a hospital in Scotland, where I underwent extensive radiological and neurological examinations. The end result was that I probably had multiple sclerosis, although I also had a form of myasthenia gravis (a very rare neurological disease involving muscle weakness) which could not be ruled out.

I returned to South Africa convinced that I was dying, and I began to fear the worst.

The disease was taking its toll, not only in my health, but in other ways as well.

I was a young, independent, energetic woman, holding down a job, running a home and caring for my husband and children. I became a semi-invalid, dependent on others for help.

I found this very difficult to bear. My medical bills were enormous and it was not long before I needed a wheelchair to get around.

As time passed I adapted as best I could. My GP prescribed prednisone (a corticosteroid drug) which seemed to help for a while, but side effects forced me to stop after seven or eight weeks. When the depression became severe I resorted to anti-depressants, but the effect was always only temporary.

In 1995 I was told that I was suffering from an overgrowth of Candida albicans — my symptoms were chronic fatigue, foggy brain, and deterioration in concentration and digestive problems. I was prescribed several medications; these certainly did help but never cured the symptoms associated with Candida overgrowth.

I also followed a rigid diet of no sugar, yeast, refined flour, various sugary fruits, dairy products and quite a lot of other foods that I previously liked as part of my normal diet.

I was assured that Rickettsia was probably not the primary problem but my symptoms continued to get worse.

Then, in May 2006 (32 years after the onset of my illness), I managed to get an appointment to see Dr Cecile Jadin in Pietermaritzburg. After my consultation several blood samples were sent for analysis. The results showed the presence of antibodies to Rickettsia spirochaete — I had Rickettsia!

I had never heard of rickettsia but from reading up about it, discovered that it is a disease caused by a group of micro-organisms that live in the body of ticks, and that I had been infected with it for at least three years.

In June I started a course of tetracycline for an infection. The following month, four weeks after the infection cleared and I had received negative results for my blood tests, I began to feel physically better.

I began to walk more and move around more. I began to feel more energetic, to feel better. I was able to get out of bed and begin to function again.

I am grateful to Dr Jadin, the same time as I am grateful to the other doctors who have helped me. The symptoms of rickettsia are quite severe, but the diagnosis is key to recovery.