

The Disease

No One Will Talk About

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS

Lesley Ayers addresses an issue rarely spoken about in Christian circles; it is one that affects sufferers in many ways, requiring our concern and compassion...

So often when we meet people, we have no idea of the difficulties they face...When Helen* enters the room, I see an intelligent and active woman in her 70s. Her steel grey hair is cut neatly to frame her face; the crisp linen shirt and classic cut skirt are immaculate. She has many interests and genuinely cares about others. There is humour in her clear blue eyes and a sense of inner peace.

Helen is not someone you would pick as battling with the effects of a sexually transmitted infection. Somehow that is not what Christian grandmothers get! She has chosen to be open about her experience in the hope that it will help others.

Unfortunately a growing number of older women have to face this reality, whether it is the result of their partner's, or their own life choices in the area of sexual activity. The disease can lie dormant for years and for some there is extra shock as past lives catch up with them.

BETRAYED

It was nearly a decade ago that Helen's world turned upside down. As she left the doctor's rooms she was stunned by the truth that at 65, she had a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI). Helen was shattered. How had her husband of 43 years betrayed her? She felt soiled and in despair. 'It

was as if people who knew me, and respected me, including my family, could see my contamination.'

She had felt uneasy for a while. You don't live with someone for that long without knowing when there is some evasion going on. 'He was on edge all the time, and too quick to deny that there was anything wrong.'

Yet, as so often happens, she had hoped that in pretending everything was alright, maybe whatever 'it' was would go away.

A news item jolted her into facing reality. Someone who had contracted an STI talked about its effects on his life and health. With horror, Helen recognised some physical symptoms that had been bothering her. She made that doctor's appointment.

Her husband could hardly deny things now. 'The discussions were bitter and painful.' The devastating truth was out—'He had slept with prostitutes on those high-powered international business trips.'

EMOTIONAL TURMOIL

Another shock was to follow. Within days, her husband was diagnosed with aggressive bowel cancer. Six weeks later he was dead. She listened numbly to the speeches at his funeral, the glowing accolades given to him as family man, church official and international businessman of repute. 'What if they knew the truth?' she wondered.

'Before he died he asked for

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WHAT ARE STIs?

STIs are a group of infections transmitted by sexual contact and cover a range of conditions including genital warts (caused by the Human Papilloma Virus), pelvic inflammatory disease (caused by bacterial infection), vaginitis (inflammation and discharge involving the vagina), and more serious, systemic infections such as HIV, Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C

A SIGNIFICANT ISSUE

The number of pathogens (or bugs) and the infections they cause are significant and STIs are a major public health problem in all countries. Because STIs include such a broad range of conditions, the spectrum of symptoms also varies greatly. To make matters worse, some infections show mild or no symptoms in some people making detection harder. It may only be much later that infection is identified after much damage has been done. For example in pelvic inflammatory disease which can result in infertility, or syphilis which can affect the heart and brain.

STI SYMPTOMS

Although symptoms vary widely, there are some important signs to be aware of. For example, any new symptom involving the vagina or urethra (bladder outlet) such as pain, irritation, yellow/green or changed discharge and odour; painful intercourse; pelvic or lower abdominal pain; an ulcer, lump, itch or rash in the pelvic region.

APPROACHING A SENSITIVE ISSUE

It is important to consult your GP if you have noticed any of the above symptoms, or if you have concerns that you may have been exposed to an STI. The thought of discussing such symptoms with anyone may seem daunting at best, however it is important to understand that many, if not most, GPs are consulted about such problems daily in their practice and are trained to deal with these concerns thoroughly and sensitively. And if this is not the case, then a second opinion may be in order.

Further info: Specific infections and links to relevant sites: Fact Sheet from Queen Victoria Women's Centre: <http://tinyurl.com/ycgo7c8>
FAQs answered by About.com: <http://tinyurl.com/ydlc9j5>



forgiveness and I gave it. That was all I had left,' says Helen. 'Then he was gone, leaving me to pick up the pieces and live with the consequences of his actions.'

Vast relief at negative results from an HIV test was soon followed by concern. Cervical screening had picked up a pre-invasive cancer. Surgery followed, then numerous colonoscopies over the years, checking for cancer. In spite of the care and sensitivity of medical staff, Helen has found the procedure embarrassing, uncomfortable and painful. 'The emotional toll has been huge,' she says. 'It's felt like it was not just my body that was exposed, but my very soul.'

She has wrestled with grief, shame and forgiveness. Counselling has helped. Helen did not want to follow the path of friends who ran from facing up to pain by living frantically busy lives, immersing themselves in careers and study, or accumulating compensatory material goods. 'One day, when they are forced to stop, the issues will still be there waiting for them. Running away is not the answer.'

Helen's suggestions:

- Don't let dread of hearing the truth put you off going to the doctor if you have symptoms of any disease, not just STI
- Bring things out into God's light. Be honest, God can take it. Read the Psalms—they were often cries of a broken people
- Reflect on stories of Jesus' dealings with women. Picture yourself in the scene experiencing his compassion
- Be wise about who to tell. Somehow sexual issues can meet a different set of judgements from other failings, such as selfish ambition, anger, envy
- Find good friends who love and value you for who you are
- Write a journal. Tell your story honestly. It is therapeutic and it can be helpful to look back and see how far you have come
- Get good counselling. Grieve your losses
- Keep fit. Helen's walking and swimming are part of her wellbeing
- Help others—your neighbours, your family, your community
- Be creative, in a way that suits you. Write, bake, sing, garden. Helen creates shimmering flower paintings
- Appreciate God's creation. Give thanks for the beauty of a garden; a sunset; the beach. It helps keep things in perspective

Helen's advice to those who know someone with an STI

- Don't judge people—we are all flawed human beings. Respond with compassion, love and a listening heart
- See the whole person; not the disease
- Pray . . . holding them in your hearts before God
- Ask if they would like support at appointments or after surgery
- Give a flower from your garden, make some soup, and take them to the movies: every small gesture says, 'I care!'

GOD'S LOVE AND COMPASSION

'Many people hug their bitterness and end up hollow shells of themselves. I realised that bitterness was not going to make the least bit of difference to him, but it could consume the rest of my life, and life is too valuable for that.'

She has been honest in her relationship with God, crying out as the psalmists often did . . . 'How could this happen? It's so unfair. What have I done to deserve this?'

There have been deep lows. Annual checkups are a constant reminder of all that has happened. But God has been central to her finding peace. 'There were fragments of me floating around looking for something concrete to give them form and substance. Yet in the void, the darkness, I still had a grain of mustard seed faith of my own.'

At first she couldn't face going to church, particularly the one where she and her husband had worshipped. 'Church is for good people, not for those with STI' was the message she gave herself, 'There's no place for me in here.'

It was only as she reflected on Jesus' dealings with women and experienced God's love and compassion, that Helen could shed the false guilt that bowed her down. 'True guilt,' she explains, 'can be life-giving when we acknowledge it and receive God's forgiveness. False guilt goes nowhere, it just drains people of energy and leads to depression.'

And although, this has been a very painful journey, she no longer feels defined by the disease, or her circumstances. 'I am a different person now,' states Helen. 'It's made me work out what's really important. I couldn't have done that by myself. The whole healing thing is all about God's grace. I'm defined by being a beloved child of God and that's all that matters.' Helen's favourite verse: Psalm 18:18, 'God rewrote the text of my life, when I opened the book of my heart to his eyes' (TMB). CW

* Not her real name