Psoriasis, Me and the Dead Sea

By Linda Newman, MFHT

This article came about because nearly five years ago both my sister and I developed breast cancer within six months of each other. This in turn led us to discussing and making our ‘bucket lists’. On my list was the wish to have one psoriasis-free summer, when I could enjoy the Cornish beaches where I live, play with my grandchildren, take them swimming with me wearing a swimsuit, and not feel like a Leper.

I’ve had Psoriasis since I was seven years old and am now 62. During that time it has never completely gone, just fluctuated as to spread; sometimes just elbows, knees and scalp (easily bearable) to widespread cover, which is uncomfortable, itchy, sore, unsightly and very depressing. Following the cancer treatment my psoriasis became increasingly worse and I slipped ever deeper into depression, trying hard to disguise how I felt from family, friends and clients. In fact many clients and acquaintances never knew I had psoriasis.
As another sufferer said to me recently, “You become the master of disguise when you’ve got psoriasis”.

Having used the various creams and ointments (many of which are steroid based), and tried the less harmful orthodox treatments, I then investigated the other orthodox treatments available and discounted them because of the possible side-affects, ie. irreversible risks to liver and kidneys (to name just two).

Having tried many of the complementary treatments, my husband and I discussed the possibility of my going to the Dead Sea for a natural treatment. Something I had often thought about since my teens but never thought viable because of the expense.

For anyone who thinks psoriasis is ‘just a skin condition that’s a bit of a nuisance’ I would like to explain just how it can affect lives.

Psoriasis in its mildest form is an irritation, an often small scaly rash, something you put up with and ignore. In its more severe form it can cover all parts of the body, head, ears, underarms, hands, feet, genital areas, within folds of skin, in fact everywhere and anywhere on the body, leaving the sufferer often feeling ugly, a misfit, a source of stares and hurtful comments. It’s not only unsightly (especially on the face, where it can’t be disguised), but uncomfortable, itchy, sore; it’s a destroyer of self-confidence, a big cause of depression. Although stress is often a trigger, having psoriasis is itself stressful.

According to a recent newspaper article there has been a rise in psoriasis, eczema and other skin conditions triggered by the stress of the ‘recession’. The distress of any skin condition, not only psoriasis, can lead some sufferers to self-harm and contemplate suicide. Psoriasis can affect one’s career options (ie. avoiding jobs that may involve uncovered arms or legs or wearing dark clothing), relationships (some of those I spoke with refrain from getting involved in close relationships), hobbies (sports and particularly swimming were often taboo - if you’re covered in scaly skin which turns very red in the water you really don’t wish to make yourself the object of other people’s stares). I only learnt to swim in my late 20s when the psoriasis was in a mild phase.

Many of us with psoriasis have received hurtful comments and one sufferer I spoke with was evicted from a swimming pool as a very young child as other parents objected to his skin and his mother was asked to remove him! I was told at age nine by my friend’s mother not to call round for her again (I suspect this was because of the psoriasis). I know my
Mother was questioned by other mothers as to the nature of my skin condition which is understandable - no one wants to contract a contagious condition if avoidable. (It most certainly isn’t contagious!) I smile when I remember an incident when I entered a jacuzzi and immediately all the other occupants got out - the look of horror on their faces at my skin was comedic but although I laughed I was also hurt. Another lady still remembers the driver of a car that nearly injured her young daughter calling her a “scabby cow”, not that many years ago. Psoriasis sufferers dread wearing dark clothes, using dark towels, dark floors in bedrooms and bathrooms, as when psoriasis is severe one leaves a shower of skin cells in your wake. Not nice but true! We also love vacuum cleaners! Everybody sheds dead skin cells, it’s just that ours accumulate so fast they become visible. There are many theories as to the cause of psoriasis but as yet there doesn’t appear to be any definite answers and definitely no cure – at least not a harm free one.

As both a therapist and a sufferer, I know that complementary treatments such as massage are ideal in reducing stress, and bringing about a calmness and positive outlook. However, I also know that when my psoriasis is at its worst I definitely won’t go for a massage and to those I spoke to whilst at the Dead Sea, not one would have a massage when they were really suffering. One gentleman I asked if he’d ever go for a massage or holistic therapy gave a very definite “No way!”. Although others I spoke to would willingly go if they felt the therapist had an understanding of their condition, in fact one made the marvellous suggestion of therapists having a logo, such as ‘PFT’ to indicate they were a ‘Psoriasis Friendly Therapist’. A brilliant idea. There is a large market of customers just waiting for the opportunity of having a massage in the right atmosphere by an understanding therapist, and with the reported increase of skin conditions, this is an area that shouldn’t be ignored. Especially as we therapists know that complementary therapies work on both a physical and psychological basis - the untapped market is there, ready and waiting!

In my 13 years of therapy work I have only ever had two clients with psoriasis and then only in a very mild form, which I feel speaks volumes when reportedly one in six people have psoriasis, let alone other skin conditions, such as vitiligo and eczema.

So, to my Dead Sea trip. A few background facts first: the Dead Sea is approximately 400 metres below sea level (the lowest point on Earth) and the water has a 33% concentration of salt and minerals, calcium, potassium, sodium, magnesium and bromide, whereas the ocean has about 3%. Apparently due to the water evaporating quickly in the intense heat, and its location, the Dead Sea has its own ozone layer helping filter out more of the damaging ultraviolet rays that can cause skin cancer, burning and ageing. This allows more
exposure and very few people suffer sunburn as long as they are careful, although sunbathing is not recommended between 11am and 2pm. The air is dry, unpolluted and pollen free and with 10% more oxygen, this helps induce relaxation and aids breathing. The sea is reportedly very beneficial for joint problems and also vitiligo, whilst just being in the filtered sunshine works on the psoriasis. Also the black mud taken from the sea-bed is reputed to be beneficial and many people cover themselves liberally with the mud. I did try this but it stung so much I hastily showered it off.

An excellent website for information on Psoriasis (as well as other skin conditions, but predominantly psoriasis) is the Psoriasis Help Organisation – [www.psoriasis-help.org.uk](http://www.psoriasis-help.org.uk) which has all the information you’d ever want to know about the condition. With help, informed advice, and an Online Forum which is, I am sure, a life-saver for many who connect. From the information on this website, I was able to book my trip which, there is no denying, was still expensive (the sale of my car helped towards raising the money). I stayed at the Moevenpick Resort and Dead Sea Spa – not the cheapest option but in my view definitely the best. Apart from the excellent 5* hotel, there is also a clinic, separate solariums for psoriasis users, a gym, and the Zara Spa which at additional cost offers a large and impressive range of treatments, as well as hydro pool, Dead Sea pools, an infinity pool and outside private relaxation areas.

I was only able to afford a couple of treatments which were wonderful and if ever a return visit is possible, I would definitely hope to afford more. All the therapists are well used to treating clients with skin conditions, so one doesn’t feel self-conscious. I would definitely recommend the Moevenpick, [www.moevenpick-deadsea.com](http://www.moevenpick-deadsea.com), the staff were extremely welcoming and helpful and the food and choice extensive and delicious, and I didn’t find being a vegetarian a problem, but there are cheaper options available. I did ask the other...
psoriasis people there about their experiences on the Israeli side of the Dead Sea as many had previously stayed there. I have to say that the view was unequivocally that Jordan was 100% better, but as I’ve only been to Jordan, I can’t give my view.

My tips to any psoriasis sufferer going to the Dead Sea would be to take a Kindle loaded with books, an iPod loaded with music, and a supply of olive, carrot or baby oil, vaseline and aloe vera gel (the vaseline is for covering any cuts and abrasions before you enter the Dead Sea, which stops the painful stinging). Also a small amount of Factor 30 or 50 sun protection for when not sunbathing or for those parts not affected by psoriasis. When I first discovered it was recommended that you covered yourself in oil prior to sunbathing I was horrified, as it went against everything I had ever been advised, but it worked.

The rooftop solarium, divided into two parts - one for women and one for men - are very private, well equipped with sun loungers, umbrellas, electric fans, showers, and plentiful supply of daily clean towels. It is recommended to start sunbathing as soon after 6.00am as possible until about 10.30am and then again in the afternoon from about 3.30pm until 6.30pm, trying to average an exposure of at least 5 hours a day and ideally take two 20-minute dips in the Dead Sea each day. In order to ensure you don’t suffer sunburn it is important to gradually increase the time sunbathing gradually; I did 1 ½ hours the first morning and increased my time each day. The Dead Sea feels very oily and entering and exiting isn’t easy because of the rocks, which are salt encrusted and also slippery. If you have any cuts or abrasions then the sea makes them sting painfully. You mustn’t stay in longer than 20 minutes, no children under 12 are allowed in, and you must be careful not to get the sea water in your eyes – very painful. Floating is easy but getting upright isn’t! There is no embarrassment or shame as you are sunbathing with fellow sufferers. Most people with psoriasis sunbathe nude within the special solariums. Ideally a stay of three weeks is recommended between
April/May or September/October and any use of steroids must be ceased at least three weeks prior to travel. At the Moevenpick, bottles of drinking water were supplied free of charge and I drank loads!

A visit to the Dead Sea is no holiday, as someone else said it is a bit of an ‘endurance test’ in lovely surroundings, with lovely food and interesting people to chat to. It is though stress free (apart from the thought of the bill at the end of the stay). The temperature at the start of my stay in May was in the 30s but by the time I left in the beginning of June, it was reportedly 52 degrees. I’m not a sunbather by nature so for me it really was difficult at times but having access to the Hotel’s internet room proved a real boon so I was able to bombard my family and friends with long emails and, even better, receive lovely chatty ones back.

So ‘remission’? From those I asked who had been many times, it would appear to be between six months to a year, some two years, whilst a couple of people said the psoriasis started to re-appear two weeks after their return. The good news is that when and if the psoriasis does return it generally comes back less severe. For me, four months after my return the psoriasis is returning but slowly and in small amounts. However, the delight of returning home to my husband with a tanned, clear skin is impossible to convey. It is somewhat ironic that I chose the wettest summer on record in the UK (and especially the West Country where I live) to undertake my trip, so my dream of having a summer on the beach (without a wetsuit) playing with the grandchildren hasn’t been realised.

There have been other benefits from the trip. Due to the cost I had to go alone (which was rather nerve-wracking, having never been away for three weeks on my own) so I gained confidence in meeting and chatting with other people, experiencing a different culture, having to make decisions I may perhaps have left to my husband, and also I got to visit Petra, another ‘bucket list’ item.

I am now off to Bosnia with the Healing Hands Charity to do a fortnights’ therapy work in Sarajevo, and as the skin isn’t too bad I feel better able to cope, although I am well aware that the people I treat will have suffered far worse. (Again, on that ‘bucket list’.)