

An underwater photograph of a coral reef. The water is a deep blue. In the upper left, a diver is visible, swimming towards the right. The reef is dominated by large, branching, orange-red coral structures. In the lower right, there are large, rounded, light-colored rocks covered in bright orange and yellow sponges or other marine life. The overall scene is vibrant and detailed.

“Here I was a 60 year old woman from the north of England seeing things beyond my wildest expectations.”

Maureen Sullivan

LIVING LIFE TO THE FULL ON WARFARIN

It's over a year since I wrote to you ('I understand your frustration' issue 36) so thought you might like an update because so much has changed for me.

I went off on my diving holiday in the Maldives with my CoaguChek. My therapeutic range is 2-3 and I registered 2.5 so spot on before I left. My husband had bought me a new flight bag for the holiday which was a rather smart one with the little doggy logo. When I got it home I found 3 extra bags inside, one a toilet bag which not only fit snugly in the bottom of the bag but was the perfect size for my coaguChek case, yellow book and medication. I got a specialised dive holiday insurance which even with my medical history was better value than all the other insurance companies we tried. No problems at airport security, x-rays etc... but I did have a letter from my GP just in case. I had not taken all my test strips as was not sure about the temperatures there and their viability. I just took 6 in the test strip container sent with the machine and wrote on the code from the original container. As always, I took care on the long flight, I took my warfarin at usual time before we left and then 24 hours later, Indian ocean time, then changed to my usual time which is in the morning when I clean my teeth. I never could remember to take the tablets at same time each evening as recommended whereas I always wake up about same time in the morning and clean my teeth. I gag very easily when taking tablets and as warfarin is so bitter, I have found if I clean my teeth and then take the tablets while 'the tingle' is still in my mouth I don't taste them. My daily dosette box is by my toothbrush so I don't forget. This did mean my third dose was earlier than 24 hours but I checked my INR first which 2.3 was so I didn't worry. The first week we were in a beach room so kept the air conditioning on to maintain a constant temperature. After 2 days of relaxing, diving, reading, eating, sleeping, I checked my INR again, it was 2.6. Still no worries.

I have always bruised very easily even before being on warfarin and it was a standard joke that I would come back from my previous diving holidays not only tanned but black & blue, as a normally clumsy person, walking in fins on a rolling boat is quite an art and my sea legs are not the best. Since I've been on warfarin I take greater care especially because of the heavy weights I need to get me down. I am a recreational diver so never go below 30 metres. I have a dive computer which rings warnings at pre-set parameters of your choice, and monitors your depth and time down. So I never take risks that would put me in danger of decompression sickness. I love the weightlessness of diving, I can float, and I can stand on my head, all impossible for me on land. I love all the beautiful sea creatures

and my husband and I take great delight in competing for who has seen the first, best, biggest, smallest creature thumbing through our well-worn creature identification guides. At the end of the first week and 10 dives, I checked my INR, it was back to 2.5.

Our 2nd week was on a dive liveaboard, a bit risky for me but the best way to get a diving fix as you go far out to sea, and can dive up to 4 dives a day. The boat which had only being launched four weeks earlier had all the mod cons including satellite communications. The safety precautions are extensive and there is always a dive guide with you. The cabin was air conditioned so a constant temperature for the coaguChek machine & strips. I never did four dives in a day; I did three dives on one day but was so shattered that by dinner time I fell asleep at the table. Some of the dive sites were so amazing you don't want to miss things, but I know my limitations, so I stuck to two dives a day. On one dive we went down to a feeding station where manta rays congregate. We all waited patiently on the bottom then suddenly they came, these glorious creatures effortlessly gliding like giant space ships and they just hovered above our heads enjoying bursting the bubbles from our regulators. It was so fantastic. When we got back on board I was crying with the emotion of it all. My boat boy, crew allocated to divers to help with their gear and getting in and out of the water – bit like having a dive butler, well he was most concerned about me. How could I explain that here I was a 60 year old woman from the north of England seeing things beyond my wildest expectations. The next day got better as when we were just snorkelling our boat boys led us to a group of whale sharks, the largest fish in the ocean, these were only comparatively small by whale shark standards – a mere 15 metres! – but magnificent creatures. All captured on my trusty underwater camera. I did just about remember to take my INR it was 2.6 so no adverse effects after 16 dives to date. Reluctantly all holidays come to an end, in the fortnight I had done 22 dives, I felt fit, relaxed and stress free. My INR on the last day before we flew home was 2.8, but was 1.9 when I got home after a long overnight flight where I didn't move as much as usual. Lesson there, even on an overnight flight need to keep moving.

So back to work in the NHS to face yet another reorganisation, my 13th in the last 25 years. Unsurprisingly my INR went down to 1.7 and my warfarin was increased. I decided I'd had enough and volunteered for redundancy retirement. After 42 years in the NHS I retired last June. I continued monitoring my INR and ringing the results to hospital warfarin clinic. It went up and stayed between 2.1 and 2.5, my dose was decreased. In the autumn we

decided to relocate to Herefordshire finding what we believed was our retirement dream in the country. The problem was nearest village and GP was three miles away. Undeterred we moved and I went to see the GP to register. He thought it was a good idea I was monitoring my INR as the options were I could have regular venous bloods done at surgery and link to nearest hospital 12 miles away or I could go to a nurse led clinic 6 miles away for finger prick. He was more than happy for me to self-manage my dose as my yellow book showed him I had been steady in last 6 months. He asked that I went for a venous sample to check machine results 6 monthly and I could get my prescription at the surgery dispensary. Any concerns just contact him. How good was that? So life in the country is proving a lot easier. I check my INR around 1st of the month (probably could do less often but it's easy to remember to do when I email or call into surgery to get my repeat prescription.) INR has remained steady between 2.3 and 2.8 the practice nurse was glad I wasn't having venous bloods regularly as my veins refuse to give up my blood when I went for the meter check sample. Meter reading 2.4, venous blood 2.3. I have had some problems getting my blood sample on to strip in time due to the coaguChek softclix needle not seeming to penetrate deep enough despite been on the highest setting. At times like that I am glad the test strips do come in batches of 24! I have cold fingers at the best of times so tried warming them in hot water first, before coming to conclusion it was probably because my hands are a bit rougher with all the gardening I now have time to do, so have stopped using the soft clix and just stab myself directly with the needle, so far has worked first time. Although I do hate the flashing egg timer counting down so quickly how long I have to get the blood drop onto the strip, then the second which seems like an eternity before you get the QC tick sign or the dreaded error number.

Life in the country has its challenges but if I can start diving in my fifties, then living in the country in my sixties should be a piece of cake. Perhaps another update next year?

Maureen Sullivan