

DANCING THROUGH PAIN

I hope more healthcare professionals will understand chronic pain demands more investigation, even when tests show nothing is wrong



After decades of chronic pain, Laura Swan finally found a doctor who could help. Now, as a nurse herself, she's advocating for compassionate care.

**By Laura Swan,
as told to Rebecca Cuneo Keenan**

I was in pain for 25 years before I found a doctor who took it seriously.

When I was young, I was trained intensively in ballet through high school, university and conservatory programs.

At 19, I injured my lower back in a fall while dancing. I remember a pop and a shooting pain, and then I was on the ground.

I didn't take time off. I didn't do the treatment recommended by my healthcare provider. I was young — I danced through the pain.

SEARCHING FOR RELIEF

With chronic pain, the body settles into a new normal. The pain is a constant presence in the background.

But there's nothing normal when everyday activities hurt. I adapted. I changed how I moved. I even stopped taking deep breaths because of the pain.

When I was 30, I left dance and got serious about seeking help. I saw my GP, sports medicine physicians and an orthopedic surgeon. I consulted chiropractors, physiotherapists and massage therapists until I could no longer afford it. I didn't have insurance and was paying out of pocket.

I was told I needed to strengthen my core to protect my back and try Pilates.

And so, I did. Nothing helped.

LIVING THROUGH PAIN

I had two children. The pain made it hard to get a good night's sleep. I needed time for icing and heat treatments. On long car rides we had to make frequent stops so I could get out and stretch. Chronic pain impacted my mood.

Managing appointments was challenging with an infant and a toddler. I remember a doctor telling me I needed to be in better shape — while I juggled bouncing one child on my hip and feeding snacks to the other.

Every few years, I tried again. My GP prescribed cannabis for the pain, but I didn't pursue it. Steroid shots provided some temporary relief.

Chronic pain can make you question your sanity. Maybe I'm not resilient enough. Maybe other people cope with pain better. I felt like a failure — discouraged, angry, sad.

A BREAKTHROUGH AT LAST

At 45, I returned to school for nursing and learned more about pain management. I knew I couldn't go on like this for another 20 or 30 years.

I researched options and found the Schroeder Pain Assessment and Rehabilitation Research Centre (SPARC) through Toronto Rehabilitation Research Institute. I waited another year for an appointment.

They were empathetic, nurturing and understanding. But when the resident suggested allied health again, I burst into tears. "No," I said. "I can't do that anymore." I asked to see the attending physician.

That doctor changed everything.

He cut through years of frustration and said: I believe you. You don't have to live like this. We can find things to help.

An updated MRI revealed a diagnosis: arthritis of the facet joints of my spine which was irritating the nerves and causing referred pain down my hip and left leg.

I was treated with a nerve ablation procedure that uses radio frequency to cauterize the nerve and stop the pain signals. The recovery felt like deep bruising, but for the first time in over 20 years, I felt relief.

My pain, which had been an 8 out of 10 on my worst days, and a 4 on average day dropped to a 1 or 2. My spirits improved.

I could sleep. I had more energy. I didn't feel like I had to 'grin and bear it' anymore. I could be present for my kids.

WHAT MEDICINE NEEDS TO HEAR

Now I'm a nurse, and my experience informs my practice. I'm empathetic and sensitive to expressions of pain.

I hope more healthcare professionals will understand chronic pain demands more investigation, even when tests show nothing is wrong. People living with pain are seeking compassion and validation.

We underreport our symptoms. We have tried more times than you know to fix this. We are nervous to put our trust in another care plan.

People in pain are exhausted. We are desperate to be believed.

As a patient, I needed someone willing to go the distance with me until I found relief. That doctor at SPARC changed my life.

But it shouldn't have taken 25 years to get there.

Laura Swan is a registered nurse and lactation consultant (IBCLC) who lives in Toronto with her two children.