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'GROWING PAINS' COST ME A KIDNEY

For six years, Hollyoaks actor RICHARD CAMBRIDGE, 30, lived with an agonising kidney infection which doctors simply dismissed as growing pains. Here, he tells his story...

WHEN I was 19, I was offered the lead role in a film called *Distant Bridges*. It was a great opportunity but I spent a lot of the shoot lying on a concrete floor in agony.

The pain had started three years earlier, when I was 16 and studying for my GCSEs. I started to get a dull ache on the right side of my back. I saw many doctors and had numerous blood and urine tests but they all came back normal.

Each time I was told that I'd probably pulled a muscle or that I had "growing pains". Some thought I was suffering muscular pain because I was quite sporty and used to row. Others said it may be down to bad posture as I have a slight curve in my spine.

Each one put me on a different medication. I had steroid injections and physiotherapy but nothing worked. I'd go back and say: "This is ridiculous. This really hurts and is ruining my life." But the same thing would happen and I'd be back to square one.

I was told to take paracetamol (which, I later learned, is the worst thing you can take for a kidney infection) but gin and bitter lemon was always the most effective pain relief for me.

During my A-levels I was in horrendous pain. A new GP did a couple of tests but, in the end, she said: "I think you've got to come to terms with the fact that these are growing pains and this is not something we can keep dealing with." It made me cry and I didn't go to the doctor for two years.

I was 21 when a locum at my old doctor's surgery said there were options which hadn't been tried. I was sent for an ultrasound scan but I had no big hopes.

During the scan, I started telling the technician that no one knew what was wrong with me when suddenly he said: "We know what it is now. You've got a blockage."

I can't begin to describe the feeling of relief. A consultant explained I had pyelonephritis, which is the medical name for inflammation of the kidney caused by a bacterial infection. My blockage was

genetic. My kidney was shaped in a way that was obstructing the normal flow of urine. When it was infected (which was once or twice a month), my kidney became inflamed and filled up with stagnant fluid which was the cause of my pain.

When the infection passed, after a few days on painkillers, the fluid would drain away and leave my kidney saggy and out of shape, a bit like a deflated balloon.

As it was being stretched this way and that, little pockets were forming in which the fluid was collecting instead of being drained away.

As the kidney was never completely clear, the infection kept on recurring.

Apparently, it was so far advanced that if the bacteria got into the bloodstream, I was at risk of developing septicemia, which could have been fatal.

A course of antibiotics – or perhaps a small operation – might have cured it, if it had been caught early enough.

But I was told the right kidney was damaged beyond repair and so, on my 22nd birthday, I had a nine-hour operation to remove it.

It was such a relief that I wasn't going to have to live with the pain any more.

I was so grateful to be well that I donated £250 – which was all my spare cash at the time – to the charity Kidney Research UK.

IT TOOK two years to recover. Before surgery, I got the lead role in a film called *Forest Of The Damned*, which came out after the operation.

I also made a short film called *The Fishmonger's Daughter*, which won a number of awards and premiered at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival in America.

I feel really healthy now. I drink plenty of water but don't have too much alcohol or salt and I don't eat much protein because that produces a waste product called urea and too much of this can overload my remaining kidney.

I'm like a different person now. Living with pain makes you miserable but now I rarely feel unhappy at all. And I don't care about the 10-inch scar I've been left with. People just assume it's a shark bite.

Interview by SALLY BECK

WHAT IS PYELONEPHRITIS?

● Pyelonephritis is an inflammation of the kidneys, usually caused when bacteria in the bladder travel up to reach one or both organs.

● It can be caused by a physical obstruction to the flow of urine, such as structural abnormality, kidney stone, a tumour or an enlarged prostate.

● It is most common in women (especially during pregnancy), diabetics and those with a weakened immune system.

● Symptoms include lower back pain, chills, fever, nausea and vomiting.

● It is usually treated with antibiotics. In rare cases, chronic pyelonephritis can

damage the kidney severely by causing scarring.

● Most people with a single kidney have few problems. Any decrease in function is usually mild and lifespan is normal, although there may be a chance of high blood pressure.

● For more information, visit www.kidneyresearchuk.org or call 0845 300 1499.