

Imprisoned by fear: Lyn Wall is too worried about her health to leave home.

When health concern turns into obsession it becomes an illness itself. Liz Hollis reports

The Hypochondria Trap

THE BIGGEST COMPLAINT BY PATIENTS 30 YEARS AGO WAS THAT THEY DIDN'T KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT HEALTH. BUT TODAY, WITH ever-increasing media coverage, for many the nightmare is that they know too much. Open any newspaper or women's magazine and you find an article about something that can go wrong with our bodies. These days we have an unlimited appetite for details about everything from gout to brain tumours, and how to avoid them. The more we strive to be healthy, the more it seems we live in fear of disease.

While we all have a right to know about our health, for some concern about their body becomes a chronic illness in itself. Many people dismiss hypochondriacs as time-wasters and attention-seekers but, with an estimated one million sufferers in Britain, it is placing a massive burden on the NHS.

So widespread is the problem that psychiatrists at the Warnerford Hospital in Oxford are now pioneering treatment to help sufferers break out of their prison of health anxiety – and alerting GPs about how to deal more effectively with such patients.

Thirty-three-year-old Lyn Wall, a former shop manageress from Gloucestershire, is one. Though doctors have found nothing organically wrong with Wall – and the NHS as it stands can do nothing more for her – her fear of illness is so acute it shows physical symptoms and has left her virtually housebound.

'It all started when I was a child. My parents were a lot older and I had sisters with children my age. I remember saying things like "I feel sick" and "I've got a headache" to get attention, I suppose. Then it started to become a habit.'

Wall kept her health anxiety under control as a teenager and while she

worked as a retail manageress, but it was always in the background. As she grew older, her anxiety was no longer an attention-seeking ploy. It was real and frightening. Eventually she felt unable to go out to work.

'Now it is an ongoing battle. I always seem to feel ill and I can't remember a time when I didn't. I am scared of illness. All my life consists of is panic and worry. I sweat and tremble. I get dizzy to the point where I pass out. I feel sick and I have stomach cramps. I don't go anywhere, I don't work and I can't drive my car. I spend most of my time at home. There are lots of things I would love to do but it always comes back to the fact that I don't feel well.'

'Health articles in magazines frighten me, but I always turn to them first. My opinion of what's wrong changes according to what I have read: I've thought I had everything from stomach cancer to a brain tumour. I eat my breakfast and three quarters of an hour later I feel sick. My father was a diabetic and I wonder if it might be that, but I have had tests and been told there is nothing physically wrong with me. I have never had a serious illness diagnosed by the doctor.'

Although Wall's case is extreme, the new age of health awareness has sent many people to the brink of panic as they read about an illness and immediately 'discover' they have all the symptoms. Although normally due to a simpler cause like stress, read a 'find out what you've got' book and you will discover that lifeless hair can be a symptom of AIDS, tiredness a symptom of cancer or heart disease, and tingling in fingers and toes a sign of leprosy.

'I can't bear even looking at medical books,' says film editor and self-confessed hypochondriac Kris Brand,



30. 'I always seem to have all the symptoms of some terrible disease. I recently had a minor urinary infection that cleared up after antibiotics, but I looked up the symptoms in a medical book and they were the same as bladder cancer and VD. It made me feel even worse.'

'There are more and more health books, articles and TV programmes. Newspapers all have health and medical correspondents and are packed full of health news. I'm all for preventive health, but I think this consumer and media hunger for all things medical can

believe it was nothing short of a plague. Newspapers bought the first-person story of anyone who had ever suffered from it, terrifying many readers into checking themselves for symptoms.



AS A FAMILY GP, DR MACGREGOR BELIEVES HEALTH ANXIETY IS WIDESPREAD AND ESTIMATES THAT ABOUT 80 PER CENT OF HIS PATIENTS HAVE AN emotional element to their symptoms.

He feels that the present set-up is unable to help people deal effectively with the

emotional element in illness and that GPs' surgeries would benefit from more on-site counsellors and alternative therapies such as massage.

Indeed, health anxiety can often be a sign that something is emotionally rather than physically wrong. We are more likely to feel under the weather or afraid of contracting a serious disease if we are over-worked and under stress, says Dr Macgregor. Ironically, people may live in secret terror for years, when a chat to their GP could quickly reassure them. 'If people are worried they might have cancer, they should tell their doctor,' he says.

June Mace runs a self-help group in Leicestershire for people with anxiety and fears. Many members have acute health anxiety. 'People have vivid imaginations and reading a health scare article or seeing something on the TV can make them terrified,' she says. She urges people to use health information to their own advantage – to learn what drugs their doctor has prescribed or learn more about an illness – but not to let it take control of their lives. 'Most scare stories are in the newspaper because they are so rare,' she says.

Mace has learnt to control her own health anxiety through relaxation. She advises taking a few minutes out of the day to totally relax. But she says doctors should never underestimate health fears.

'You have palpitations and you think you are going to have a heart attack and die. You feel dizzy or tired and build it up until you think there is something seriously wrong with you. I had to write to my doctor and tell him how I was. I was petrified of going to hospital or the doctor because I might have something seriously wrong. It ruins your life and you have to stop it taking hold.'

Apart from the odd GP who is geared up to deal with health anxiety, the NHS,

as it stands, is unable to help patients like Lyn Wall and June Mace. After countless expensive exploratory tests, and no sign of any organic illness, many hypochondriacs are no further forward.

They may have a sense of being fraudulent, but at Oxford's Warnerford Hospital the condition is treated as a genuine illness – often the first stage to recovery. Dr Paul Salkovskis, consultant psychiatrist at the unit, uses a simple analogy to show how health anxiety can develop. If an anxious person hears there is an outbreak of car bombing, they will start to notice empty cars. There are usually many empty cars on the road, but suddenly a new belief about what's dangerous means these assume a new importance.

The same thing happens with health. Most people, for example, have irregular heart beats and get out of breath from time to time, but health anxiety puts a new spin on this: it can be seen as a symptom of a heart attack. The Oxford unit teaches people to think through their perception processes – for example realising that every time they think about heart disease, the palpitations start.

The next stage might include teaching them to control physical symptoms through simple techniques like relaxation, and helping them understand how their symptoms are working in other direct ways.

One patient at Warnerford had suffered feelings of choking for eight years and was living on a liquid diet. She was helped by coming into an environment that accepted her condition as genuine and realised that she couldn't 'pull herself together'. She was shown how muscles tense up when you concentrate on them and learnt that this was effectively what was happening to her throat.

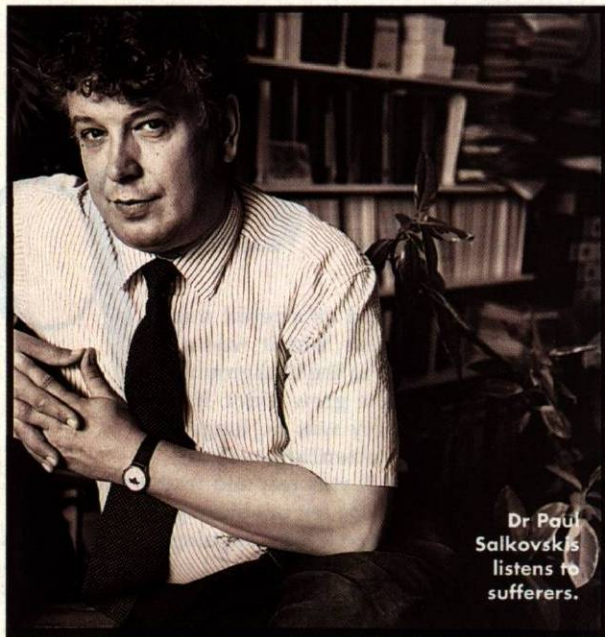
The Oxford unit is leading the world in treating health anxiety. Although there is a long way to go before ordinary GPs can tackle the condition, it is hoped that ultimately every doctor's surgery will be geared up to identify and treat it – potentially saving the NHS millions of pounds in unhelpful medication and tests that treat the symptoms rather than the cause of health anxiety.

Although many health phobics have exhausted every treatment avenue with their GP, Dr Salkovskis believes no one should give up hope of a cure.

'My message is that there is always hope. I have never come across anyone for whom there is no hope. Our experience is that with this particular treatment a lot of people get rid of their problem entirely and almost everyone is going to benefit,' he says.

H&F

● Phobic Action, Claybury Grounds, Manor Road, Woodford Green, Essex IG8 8PR; helpline tel 081-559 2459. Booklets are available, including one on health anxiety, for £1 each.



Dr Paul Salkovskis listens to sufferers.

'I have never come across anyone for whom there is no hope'

sometimes get things out of perspective and worry people unnecessarily.'

Dr Roy Macgregor, family doctor and editor of *Symptoms and Early Warning Signs* (Viking, £15.99), says medical books must put symptoms into perspective to avoid alarming people. His book clearly divides symptoms into probable, possible and rare.

He feels that media scare stories distort the risk and are making people concerned about what are, in reality, minor risks.

'A recent TV programme about mercury poisoning from dental amalgam is a typical example,' he says. 'People are more likely to get mercury poisoning from walking past a crematorium where they burn bodies than from fillings.'

Media-hyped scares like the recent 'flesh-eating bug' prey on our innate fear of death and illness. Although there were just the expected handful of annual cases of the bug that can 'eat' flesh and kill its victim within hours, the amount of coverage in the press led many to