

Cybill Shepherd and the Irritable Bowel

By Sophie Lee

Cybill Shepherd has revealed that she is a fellow IBS sufferer. The star of *Moonlighting* and *Taxi Driver* says that she has struggled with her symptoms for many years, and is now hoping to raise awareness of IBS and encourage sufferers to talk more openly with their doctors.

She says: "For years I have been battling recurring constipation, abdominal pain and bloating. Go ahead and laugh. We laugh because we're embarrassed. In order for us to get relief, we have to talk about our symptoms and stop suffering in silence.

"I have tried nearly everything: changing my diet and watching what I ate. I exercised regularly. I even tried taking fibre supplements and over-the-counter laxatives, but nothing helped with all of my symptoms.

"My doctor used to tell me it was all emotional and psychological. So I got a new doctor. And a year and a half ago, I was diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome with constipation. It was a huge relief to find out that my IBS with constipation was not all in my head and that it was a treatable medical condition. My doctor prescribed Zelnorm and it has provided me with relief for all my symptoms. In a lot of ways, I feel like my old self again."

And good for her! I think that many IBS sufferers will identify with what she says: from embarrassing, unmentionable symptoms to doctors who insist that our bowel problems are really in our heads.

We may identify less with her relief from one drug alone (although the new drugs Zelnorm and Lotronex have had a good success rate in America), but we could all benefit from talking more openly with our doctors and looking for more solutions rather than accepting that IBS will rule our lives.

What Cybill Shepherd has done, though, is more than just draw attention to the fact that IBS sufferers need more help. Just by revealing that she is an IBS sufferer she has shown that IBS can affect anyone. Here is a glamorous, successful actress, someone who has snogged Bruce Willis and won three Golden Globes, saying that she has trouble with her bowels.

Amazing Women

Cybill Shepherd is taking part in an IBS publicity campaign organised by the non-profit US organisation the National Women's Health Resource Center (NWHRC) and the drug company Novartis, makers of Zelnorm.

The campaign is called *Amazing Women* (I'm afraid that men are excluded because Zelnorm has only been tested for use in women), and will also involve a network of patients talking about their own IBS experiences. Cybill Shepherd herself is attending a number of events to speak about her IBS story.

The organisers say that nearly six million American women suffer with constipation-predominant IBS. The Amazing Women campaign has its own website at www.zwomen.org where you can find out more and watch a short video of Cybill Shepherd talking about her symptoms.

The power of celebrity

In these celebrity-soaked times, when we have grown weary of watching people we've hardly heard of eat bugs in the jungle, it can be easy to forget that famous people sometimes achieve genuinely selfless and compassionate things just by using their fame. The greatest power that they have is the ability to shine the light of their stardom on an issue which would otherwise have been ignored.

And yes, the issue may sometimes be whatever cause is most fashionable at the time - "Gay whales against racism" as one satirist put it - or the one which helps the star more than the people (or whales) who are suffering. But sometimes there is no doubt that the celeb has really stuck their neck out to help others who are dealing with an issue that is considered untouchable.

And I can't think of a more untouchable issue than IBS, something that no-one in the public eye would readily admit to. Can you imagine Julia Roberts standing up and saying "Diarrhoea is the blight of my life and haemorrhoids have driven me to drink"? No, of course not, because anything remotely digestive is considered highly embarrassing and distinctly unglamorous.

Cybill Shepherd's admission, therefore, is to be applauded. She may have been 'recruited' by the makers of Zelnorm to get publicity for their drug, but she's also working with a non-profit agency just to raise awareness of IBS, and even attending events in person to speak directly to IBS sufferers.

Plus, Zelnorm itself is no snake-oil medication. In fact, it is one of the only new drugs specifically developed for IBS sufferers. It has proved to be very useful for many constipation-predominant sufferers in America, and it's a scientifically-tested drug that can offer real help to IBS patients.

Dare not speak its name

Before Cybill Shepherd 'came out', the only famous people I knew of who had IBS were Kelsey Grammar's wife (Kelsey Grammar used to play Frasier in the eponymous sitcom and *Cheers*) and Denise Welch from *Coronation Street* and *Down to Earth*. Denise Welch said in a newspaper interview that she once went nine days without a bowel movement, and I thought to myself: "Good for you".

Whoever you are, whatever your gender or problems or pain, it is vital that you find someone with whom you can identify. If you watch TV and never see a reflection of yourself, if you are a black man and only ever see white faces on screen, then you will start to feel alienated - and the same goes for people who are ill.

If you constantly hear about diabetes sufferers and asthma sufferers but never hear a word about bowels then you begin to learn that your illness is far less important than these other worthy causes.

We need more people in the public eye standing up and saying "Me too", so that everyone can start to realise just how widespread a problem this is.

Don't suffer in silence

But it's not just about how other people perceive us, and how we perceive ourselves. It's also about making sure that anyone who has bowel symptoms seeks help, and at the moment that just doesn't happen.

Through my website I still hear from people who are too ashamed or embarrassed to go to the doctor and just soldier on through their lives when they could be receiving treatment. And there's always the risk, of course, that their symptoms could actually be the result of something other than IBS that may get progressively worse if it is left alone.

IBS often goes undiagnosed for years, and even when we pluck up the courage to visit the doctor we can be so tongue-tied that we don't properly describe our symptoms. If we could leave our embarrassment in the waiting room it would be so much better for our health.

Cybill Shepherd says: "My goal is to urge all women to get over their embarrassment, to stop suffering in silence the way I did, and to talk to their doctors. Although it may be uncomfortable, it is very important for you to be open and honest with your doctor about all your symptoms".

And things can change. Just think about breast cancer, which is now regularly discussed on everything from *GMTV* to *Newsnight*, but 20 years ago was stuck behind a wall of silence where breasts were not to be mentioned, cancerous or not.

If we can just get a few more Cybill Shepherds to speak out for IBS then the celebrities of this world might start wearing ribbons for you and me, and leave the gay whales to fight for themselves.

Sophie Lee has had IBS for 16 years. She runs the website [IBS Tales](#) where you can read hundreds of personal experiences of IBS.