

Steven Sharp works for a printer cartridge company in Livingston, Scotland

It can be hard to approach the subject of IBD with a current or potential employer – but being open about it has served Crohn's and Colitis UK community champion Steven Sharp well

WORDS JULIE PENFOLD PHOTOGRAPHS MIKE WILKINSON

# BACK TO BUSINESS

For Steven Sharp, 26, from Fauldhouse, West Lothian, in Scotland, being upfront about having Crohn's Disease with employers and colleagues is the norm.

"I've been honest about my condition at the interview stage with every job I've applied for," he says. "I'm an open book when it comes to my Crohn's and I feel fortunate that I've only had positive experiences in my working life. I sometimes wonder if my employment experiences would have been different if I had chosen not to be so honest."

Steven was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease when he was 12 and had to have emergency ileostomy surgery at the age of 17.

He admits living with IBD through his late teens and early 20s did cause some upheaval with his career aims. After getting his head around having a stoma at 17, Steven required further surgery when he was 20 and 22. This meant he could only work at best on a short-term basis as his deteriorating health took priority. At worst, he was forced to stop working altogether.

"At that age, you're really looking to start to make a career for yourself and that's something I wasn't really able to do," he explains. "I was recently visiting my gran [who sadly died in December] in hospital and she was being cared for by nurses who were actually people I went to high school with. That really made me think about how my life was essentially put on hold at that time because of IBD."

He is keen to develop a successful career in sales and administration, and enjoys working in an office as part of a team. Steven is employed by Infotone Imaging Supplies as a customer account manager. He is part of a small sales team based at the company's Livingston office. Steven is happy at Infotone and has a firm eye on promotion within the company.

Being able to talk about his condition at work and knowing his managers and colleagues have an

understanding of how IBD affects him is important to Steven.

“I don’t want to be employed as a number in the workplace – I want to be employed as a person,” he says. “Having Crohn’s is a massive part of my life and I don’t want to hide it. If I have to dash to the toilet because of an issue with my stoma or if I become unwell, I want to know there

won’t be an environment of all eyes on me when I return. Not being judged or made to feel awkward by your employers or colleagues makes such a difference.”

The support Steven receives from management and colleagues makes it easier to deal with those days when he has flare-ups. He finds the colder months particularly tough as he

## “I HAD TO LEAVE MY POST DUE TO MY DIAGNOSIS”

Having an understanding employer isn’t always enough – IBD can be a dealbreaker in certain circumstances. Elliot James, Crohn’s and Colitis UK’s young people and families development officer, had to give up a position with the Royal Navy Reserve following his diagnosis with Crohn’s Disease.

“At the time, if your Royal Navy job allowed it – for example, if you were shore-based

– you could be medically downgraded once you had a confirmed diagnosis,” Elliot says. “But that wasn’t possible with my role so I was discharged on medical grounds.”

Elliot has had a varied career so far, which has included working for the Church of England as an ordained minister. While training for ministry the church raised concerns about his condition.

Elliot had to allow the church’s doctor access to his medical records so they could find out more about the severity of his Crohn’s and how it may affect him.

Elliot admits he hasn’t always declared his condition as he didn’t want to be disadvantaged when applying for jobs. Working for the charity has helped him to better understand how unaware employers can be about IBD and

how it can affect people – even with caring employers.

“When you have to take time off, you may be asked to explain why. How do you articulate fatigue in that context?” he asks. “Trying to explain that it isn’t just a matter of you feeling a little sleepy can be difficult.

“I feel those questions need to be approached with much more gentleness by employers as it can be tricky to explain the symptoms associated with a flare-up or a worsening of your condition. You may find yourself being pulled into a meeting to discuss your absence all because someone didn’t understand what you meant by fatigue. Taking the time to find out more about how IBD affects an employee is the best way to gain that understanding.”



Elliot James now works for Crohn’s and Colitis UK

## I DON’T WANT TO BE EMPLOYED AS A NUMBER IN THE WORKPLACE

## DO YOU DISCLOSE?

You may be concerned that you will be at a disadvantage if you declare your IBD on an application form, CV or at an interview.

However, the Equality Act 2010 makes it unlawful for employers to ask invasive questions

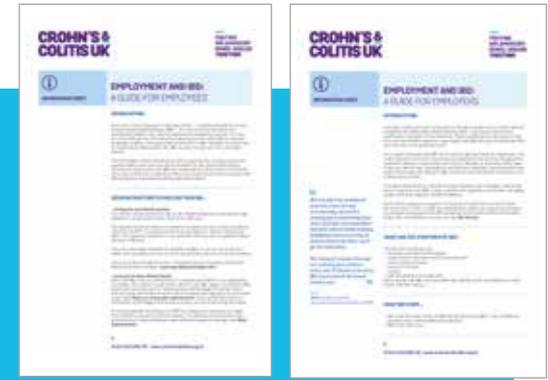
about your health – including previous sickness absence – before making a job offer.

If you do mention your IBD you may find it helpful to show them our leaflet, Employment and IBD: a guide for employers.

If your diagnosis comes when you are already working, or if your condition deteriorates, you may wonder whether to tell your manager about it. Although there is generally no legal requirement to

disclose a medical condition it may be something to think about.

FOR MORE INFORMATION  
crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/  
employersguide



Steven Sharp and his supervisor, Helen McKenna

when he’s not feeling 100%,” says Helen McKenna, Steven’s office supervisor. “We try to support him as much as we can as we fully understand his condition and how it can affect him. I have arthritis and when Steven’s explaining about his joint pain I really do understand.

“Steven’s role is predominately desk-based, making and taking calls, although it also includes carrying out administrative tasks. When he has issues with his joints we will do the running around for him. For example, if he wants a drink one of us will get it for him. If he has to do some research on one of the computers in the office we’ll find out what he requires and get that information for him. If he needs to collect print-outs we’ll take care of that too. We help out to ensure Steven doesn’t have to move out of his chair for any other reason than to go to the toilet.

“He has explained to us how embarrassing it can be when he isn’t well at work. We give Steven as much time and space as he needs and we support him in every way we can. Most of us didn’t know anything about Crohn’s or IBD before meeting

Steven. He’s really given all of us a better understanding.”

Infotone has also embraced Steven’s passion for fundraising for Crohn’s and Colitis UK and the company has helped to raise awareness of IBD throughout its sites in Scarborough, York, Livingston and Dublin.

Even though the Livingston office only opened in May, the company was keen to get on board and support Steven and Crohn’s and Colitis UK by wearing purple for World IBD Day. Steven is also one of the charity’s community champions and is passionate about raising awareness and funds – he has raised more than £12,000 in the past two years, with the full support of Infotone.

Steven appreciates that other people living with IBD may not feel as comfortable opening up to employers and colleagues.

“They may worry that they’re going to be judged negatively or perhaps won’t be seen as favourably as others if they choose to talk about their health,” he says. “Concerns around how IBD will interfere with work are another big cause of employment anxiety. It is always a worry in the back of my mind that I could have a bad flare-up that could make me very ill and affect my employment. However, I’d like to think that as more employers gain an understanding of IBD they will see the person they are employing, not just the condition.”