



Diagnosed with CVID in his 40s, Pete Atherton has not let his illness thwart his career goals, earning a doctorate degree and working in executive roles.

PROFILE: Pete Atherton

By Trudie Mitschang

PETE ATHERTON IS a successful business executive, devoted husband, father and recent grandfather who refuses to let common variable immune deficiency (CVID) stop him from achieving his life and career goals. With a career path that includes a doctor of philosophy in computer graphics, and executive leadership roles at successful venture-backed technology companies, GE's Global Research Center and two mid-size manufacturing corporations, this busy 65-year-old is currently working in retirement with a tech startup focused on commercializing a breakthrough solar energy technology. Known for his positive attitude and tenacity, Pete offers encouragement and inspiration that a chronic illness need not derail hopes and dreams for a promising future.

Trudie: You were diagnosed with CVID in your 40s. Were there any clues growing up that you were chronically ill?

Pete: I learned later in life that my parents saw me as a sickly child, but I was fortunate because I never heard that as a child. I was very active growing up and never thought of myself as different. I remember a couple of knee scrapes that got quite infected, and I also got a lot of mouth sores as a child. Looking back on my teens and 20s, I was able to go hard in both sports and studies, although there were a few hints along the way that something was wrong.

Trudie: When did your symptoms get worse?

Pete: In my later 30s and 40s, I started getting more colds that turned into bad sinus infections. I recall the congestion being bad, but the soreness of my sinus tissue was awful and sometimes bled. Then, the sinus infections turned into pneumonia, sometimes two or three times a year. On top of that, it was tough to get to sleep. I was finally diagnosed with CVID at age 44, and I will always be very thankful to the doctor who diagnosed it and changed my life for the better.

Trudie: What was your original treatment plan, and how has it evolved?

Pete: I remember getting the first immune globulin (IG) infusion in a doctor's office, and I had such a bad reaction while driving home that I had to pull off the road. Early infusions caused spikes in fevers and bad shakes. This went on for several months until we got advice to start infusions at a low rate and slowly ramp up to a moderate rate. The infusions went from one-and-a-half hours to six hours, and it worked! I am also very fortunate to be married to a wonderful woman for 40 years who has degrees in microbiology and nursing. She has contributed a lot of medical knowledge over the years, and has been my infusion nurse for the past 10 years.

Trudie: Have you had any adjustments in medication?



Pete: Over the years, I have been through a few changes in medicine for various reasons. I have been on Privigen infusions for four years at the recommendation of my current specialist, who is great, and it has worked very well for me. Heading into Medicare, I tried HyQvia (subcutaneous IG), but it did not work as well for me as it has for others, and I have returned to Privigen.

Trudie: Were you recently approved for Medicare?

Pete: Yes. I was recently accepted to the Medicare IVIG Demonstration project that allows me to continue infusions at home. Medicare Part B covers specific diagnoses, and I was very fortunate that my CVID diagnosis is one of them. The warning I have heard is that it is covered today, but that could change in the future.

Trudie: In what ways has living with chronic illness been challenging personally and professionally?

Pete: I was on football, wrestling and tennis teams in high school, wrestling and rugby teams at Penn State, rugby in graduate school at Cornell and a member of GE's national corporate relays team in my 40s. I also coached kids' soccer and wrestling for several years. I think because of the tough training and competition from sports, I just tried to get tough and power through. What choice did I have? I still had to support a family, and work was challenging. Among other things, I learned to use DayQuil and NyQuil frequently, along with coffee, and I got antibiotics when needed.

Trudie: You've had a high-profile, demanding career. Have you ever felt the need to hide your illness from colleagues or business associates?

Pete: Yes! After my CVID diagnosis, I kept the treatments to myself, always doing them at home and away from work hours when possible. Since CVID is not



Pete's wife, Liz, who has degrees in microbiology and nursing, has been his infusion nurse for the past 10 years.

contagious, I wanted to keep it as private as possible. I also knew the cost was high, and did not want to risk my job over it. Very few people ever knew about it, although some did see some of the effects it had on me.

Trudie: What was one of your biggest hurdles?

Pete: Changing jobs was very tricky because insurance continuation was critical to avoiding the preexisting condition issues. Getting new treatment required a local doctor's approval, getting a prescription and lining up an infusion service. All of that had to happen in a few weeks to get a smooth transition from a different city hundreds of miles away. The issue is that if continuity is broken, then the insurance companies can re-evaluate. Apparently, this is also true with Medicare supplemental plans and, maybe, Part D since those are provided by insurance companies. There is a period of time when you first sign up that they can not refuse you or raise the rates, but if you sign up after that time frame or change insurance companies, then they have the option of refusing you based on preexisting conditions.

Trudie: Many people feel limited by CVID. Did you ever feel tempted to not push so hard?

Pete: I never thought of myself as limited, and I do not think about CVID or other health issues very much other than trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle. I would advise that it is one of those many challenges that life throws at you. Solve it as best you can like other challenges, and move on. I would also advise not feeling sorry for yourself. Strive to accomplish what is important to you, and enjoy life's journey.

Trudie: For someone wanting to make career advances despite chronic illness, what advice do you offer?

Pete: While it is good to share things, especially with close friends and family, dwelling on negativity can drag relationships down, and after a while, people don't want to hear it. If you put yourself in a manager's position at work, do you think they are going to favor someone who focuses on doing a great job or dwelling on health issues?

Trudie: Do you have a favorite quote or life philosophy?

Pete: Work hard, accept challenges, but don't forget to smell the flowers along the way. Time goes by too fast. Don't let your medical condition hold you back. ■

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