

Hypothyroidism—where the thyroid gland produces insufficient amounts of the hormone thyroxine to regulate bodily functions—is a Cinderella of a disease. Nobody seems too interested in it, and doctors believe it is easily treated with levothyroxine tablets.

But that wasn't Sheila Turner's experience, nor has it been for the thousands of others diagnosed with hypothyroidism—the drugs just haven't made any difference. Although she had been on thyroxine for three years, she continued to suffer bouts of fatigue, weight gain, coldness, hair loss—eventually she lost all the hair on her body, including her head—and severe pain. Sometimes the pain was so bad that she had to lie on the floor of her Yorkshire home and couldn't even pick herself up to go to the toilet.

Out of desperation she visited a hormone specialist, who explained that levothyroxine was delivering inactive thyroxine (T4), which the body has to then convert into the active T3 (triiodothyronine) form. However, her body was unable to do this—just like the bodies of many others diagnosed with hypothyroidism—so the standard therapy was useless.

Instead, a doctor—who has since been struck off the medical register for daring to offer a non-drug solution—prescribed Sheila one grain (60 mg) of a natural thyroid extract, Armour Thyroid USP, which contains active ingredients of all of the forms of thyroxine the body needs.

"After only nine days, the effect on my health was stunning. The sun came out and 13 years later it has never gone back in. I am pain-free, symptom-free and a very healthy and happy woman," she says.

Astonished by her almost immediate improvement, Sheila wanted to know why medicine had got it so wrong. There she hit a brick wall: according to doctors, hypothyroidism is simply and effectively treated every time with levothyroxine; if it isn't, you're suffering from "a functional somatoform disorder", according to Prof Tony Weetman, an endocrinologist, which is a kind of convoluted way to say the problem is all in your head.

Digging deeper, Sheila discovered this was not the standard line less than 50 years ago. Up until then, natural thyroid extract had been the only way to treat

The great thyroid scandal

Pensioner Sheila Turner found out the hard way about medicine's 'blind spot' when it comes to diagnosing and treating hypothyroidism



Sheila, before and after she discovered a natural solution to her thyroid disease

hypothyroidism—and had been for 120 years. Then in the mid-1970s, the drugs industry developed their synthetic version, levothyroxine, which quickly established itself as the standard therapy.

Endocrinologists today seem to be unaware of any alternatives to drugs. Sheila's own endocrinologist was so impressed by the evidence she sent him that he agreed to change her treatment and informed her local GP to issue a prescription for natural thyroid extract. The GP refused and asked her to find another surgery.

Nonetheless, it is extraordinary that an expert knew nothing of such a large part of his own specialty and had to be taught it by a pensioner who had heard about the disease only a few years earlier.

Some endocrinologists she contacted were grateful to hear the 'news', while others were just downright rude. Some described natural thyroid extract as a 'potion' and one said that "if patients believed they got better on such a medication, then that was proof that it was all in their heads, and it was their head that needed examining". Another said she was doing hypothyroid patients a

great disservice because what she was touting was unstable and dangerous.

However, the manufacturers had told her that Armour's contents were standardized and had been independently tested by four US laboratories, which found that it was well within the safety specifications laid down by the United States Pharmacopeia.

Realizing there was a great deal about hypothyroidism that doctors didn't know, or weren't telling, Sheila set up an alternative patient-support website—Thyroid Patient Advocacy (TPA) at www.tpa-uk.org.uk—to help others who were going through what she had suffered.

In a TPA survey of 1,500 hypothyroid patients, 78 per cent said they were not being helped by levothyroxine, which suggests the drug is not effective for the majority of the 250,000 Britons annually diagnosed with hypothyroidism.

This is down to the failure of medicine to understand the subtleties of hypothyroidism. Many of those whose condition doesn't respond to levothyroxine have a different thyroid problem, euthyroid hypometabolism, which isn't picked up by the usual thyroid function tests. "We know for a fact that more than 250,000 patients are being left to suffer because they are being denied the T3 thyroid hormone replacement that will make them well."

Sheila has written numerous times to medicine's governing bodies—including hundreds of references each time—about the shortcomings of current thyroid tests and the refusal to even entertain the use of active natural products. On every occasion save one she has not received a reply, and the one response was a stonewalling denial that hypothyroidism needed anything other than levothyroxine. She has also taken her case to the Human Rights Commission, among others, and has achieved a breakthrough with the Scottish Parliament, which is prepared to consider legislation to change the way hypothyroid disease is tested and treated. It held its first debate on the issue last February.

"I am thankful every day of my life for natural thyroid extract, which has given me back my life and my health, without which I would not be in a position to campaign for other sufferers of the disease," she says.