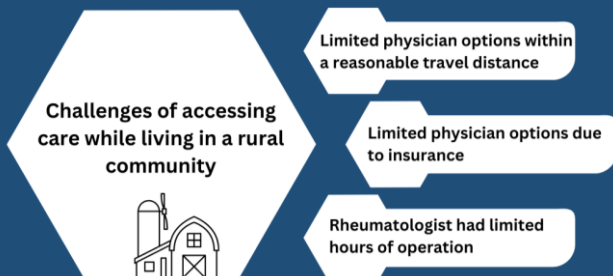


Living with Rheumatoid Arthritis in a Rural Farming Community: How I Found a Rheumatologist and Got Targeted Treatment

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I'm Vanessa, a teacher, married to James, a farmer, for 27 years. We have 5 children and when my fourth was born, I found myself too weak to pick her up from her crib. When I did, it left my hands, arms and shoulders and aching to the point that I'd walk around holding them up and crying. I went to my family physician who thought it might be Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) and referred me to a local rheumatologist who was available once a week only. Soon after the birth of my 5th child, this rheumatologist moved, and it took 6 months to find a new one. Unfortunately, the new rheumatologist was also available only once a week and appointments were difficult to get. She placed me on a DMARD along with steroid shots during flares. Despite the steroids, which made me feel anxious, there were times that I couldn't work, and my family had to help me dress. My rheumatologist never discussed treatment change options.



Intervention

My cousin, working in RA research, suggested I seek out a proactive rheumatologist. Finding a substitute teacher to cover me for the day is hard, so I wanted a rheumatologist who is located not too far from me. I found a rheumatologist about an hour's drive from my house who said that my medication was not working and that changes had to be made. He stopped the steroids and placed me on a biologic along with my current DMARD. My symptoms improved dramatically. I was given a direct phone line to reach the rheumatologist's nurse which resulted in quick response when I am flaring. The rheumatologist's office is open four days a week and then nurses are available on the fifth day to order refills and convey special needs to the doctor.

My Journey to Effective Treatment



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Maintenance

During the COVID shut down I met with my rheumatologist via Zoom. Despite me getting COVID twice during the pandemic, my rheumatologist was readily available for medical advice. Controlling my RA has been difficult due to other health problems. I had COVID pneumonia, further weakening my immune system and leading to hospitalization with Legionnaires Disease with a CT showing a mass in my right lung. My rheumatologist and pulmonologist are now consulting after the next CT to see if it is related to my DMARD use.

Quality of Life

Living in a rural area has taught me that advocating for myself is important. There is no rheumatologist in my town and the local hospital has closed. Rural health care is increasingly difficult to navigate. When going to physicians, it is extremely important that I write a list of each of my concerns and bring someone with me. James has spoken up on things he feels that I am sugarcoating. I remember that I know my body, pain level, symptoms, and what is working for me. If I feel my concerns are being dismissed, I say so or look elsewhere.