

COMMUNITY

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Disease's sensitive nature a real barrier

Crohn's and colitis sufferers often reluctant to get treatment, says local chapter volunteer

By Stephanie Thiessen
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Tancy has some minor stomach cramps, but shrugs them off as simple gas.

Joe is doubled over in pain and isn't able to get out of bed. And Christine has just had an embarrassing accident during an important meeting.

Although these people are all fictional, they portray all too real symptoms commonly experienced by sufferers of Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. But, like Nancy, many people don't know the symptoms — even if they're experiencing them and should be seeking treatment.

What sometimes makes the warning signs even more dismissive is that they can come and go. But it's important to seek medical help right away. Once the damage is done, it can't be reversed.

"The quicker you get on it, the better success you'll have (with treatment)," said Jeff Truswell, a volunteer with the Halton chapter of the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of Canada (CCFC).

The sensitive nature of Crohn's and colitis is probably one reason it's not well understood by the public, Truswell noted. Because symptoms can be embarrassing, people don't talk as openly about it as they might about other diseases. And yet, roughly 170,000 Canadians suffer from inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), a term that "covers both Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis.

Canada has highest rate

Truswell said Canada has the highest incident rate in the world for some unknown reason.

"There's probably someone each of us knows who has this disorder," he said.

According to the CCFC's Web site, Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis affect the digestive system and cause the intestinal tissue to become inflamed, form sores and bleed easily.

Symptoms of ulcerative colitis — which involves all or part of the colon — include bloody diarrhea, which may be accompanied with cramps, tiredness, loss of appetite and weight, nausea and vomiting or a mild fever.

Crohn's disease has more varied symptoms, including the most common—abdominal pain—as well as decreased

appetite, weight loss and diarrhea. Other warning signs might include unexplained fevers, joint pain or anemia.

Crohn's involves any part of the gastrointestinal tract, from the mouth to the anus.

IBD can be extremely debilitating, although it's not normally terminal. At this point, there's no known cure.

The disease is most often diagnosed between the ages of 15 and 25 or 45 and 55. It can wreak havoc with a sufferer's self esteem, particularly when there are "leakage issues," Truswell said.

Can be embarrassing

This is especially true when it strikes young people, who are at a time in their lives when they just want to fit in, Truswell said.

Treatment can be as minor as small dietary adjustments, but more serious cases require powerful medications.

If the disease is advanced, surgery might be necessary to remove the colon or diseased portion of the bowel.

"Some people underestimate it, thinking it's a bit of cramping or nausea. But it's a lot more than that," Truswell said. "Some people are practically crippled and can't get out of bed."

Although many experts believe there's a genetic component, that hasn't yet been proven, Truswell said.

"They haven't pieced together what's responsible," he said.

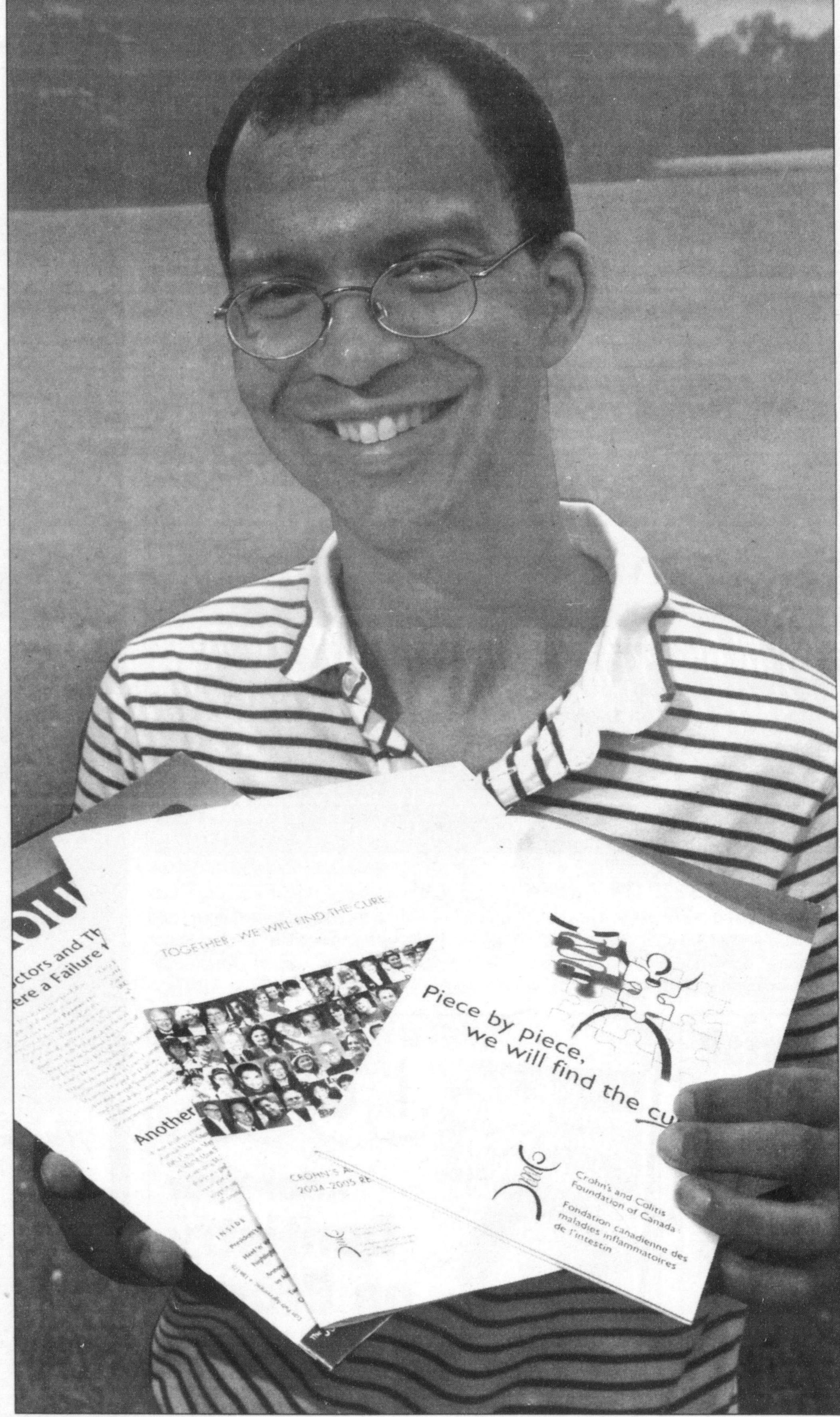
For the past 32 years the CCFC has been working to bring these illnesses into the public eye and raise money for research.

"There's some exciting research to find a cure," said Truswell, who began volunteering two years after watching three of his cousins suffer from serious cases. "It's a nasty disease and I didn't want others to suffer from it."

Each month, volunteers meet to plan events that include educational seminars and fundraising events. The foundation's two largest fundraisers are the M&M Meat Shops' annual barbecue and the Heel 'n' Wheel-a-Thon, held in Burlington for the past few years.

The Halton chapter is always looking for volunteers. Those interested can call (905) 381-0258 or visit www.ccfc.ca.

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BARRIE ERSKINE / SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

Volunteer Jeff Truswell displays some literature regarding Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis.

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