

In October 2010, **Lauren Vaknine** joined the BHA's board of trustees. At 26 Lauren is the youngest member of the board. She has suffered from rheumatoid arthritis since she was two years old and in this interview talks openly about her illness, life and the contribution she wants to make as a trustee.

When were you first diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and what treatment have you received?

● I was diagnosed with Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis (JRA) when I was two years old which initially affected my knees and ankles. At the time the only treatment available was large quantities of steroids, but my parents didn't want me to be on these drugs at such a young age, which was fortunate for the long-term effects of treating such young children with high doses of steroids were later found to do more harm than good. Looking for other options my parents decided to try homeopathy.

childhood I attended group hydrotherapy sessions and always had more energy than the other children who were being slowed down by steroids. I was still not like most normal children and my arthritis affected me, but homeopathy kept my body strong and able to fight illnesses.

Homeopathic medicine is now the only medication I take. I attend the RLHIM every two months where I see a number of doctors including Dr Peter Fisher. I'm prescribed various medicines depending on what is going on with me at the time, but I do find Pulsatilla very helpful. This is why I love homeopathy: it treats the person not the disease.

Dynamic new voice joins the board

Have you received any conventional treatment?

● When I was 17 I had a huge arthritic flare-up. In my right eye I had Uveitis, an inflammation of the middle layer of the eye, a condition most children with JRA get at a young age. A cataract was forming rapidly but they couldn't remove it as in normal cases as there was too much inflammation in the eye. The cataract was growing more layers and getting dangerous, so I had to take a conventional medication for a short period of time in order to have the operation. I was prescribed a chemo-based drug which I shall call "M". After a few months this drug made me so ill I couldn't function any more. The arthritis started to spread – it was only in five joints for the first 18 years of my life. By the time I'd been taking M for a year, the arthritis had spread to every joint in my body – hips, fingers, jaw, neck, elbows, everywhere. I also lost half my hair and it damaged my liver. I was also wheelchair bound, so I swore never to take a conventional medication again.

How do you manage your illness now?

● I started seeing a homeopath when I was just four years old and it has kept me strong for so many years. During my

How successful has homeopathy been in managing your illness?

● I believe that the only reason I live a normal life is because of homeopathy. Most people who have had arthritis for 24 years have many deformities, and other secondary illnesses due to all the medications they have taken over the years. I am proud to say that I am strong, have great general health and a good immune system and I look like a normal 26 year old. I'm convinced this is only because I have been using homeopathy from a very young age. If I'd spent my childhood taking conventional medicine, I'm sure I wouldn't be as healthy as I am now. My rheumatologist, who is not a homeopath, says my bone density should be much worse than it is after 24 years of arthritis. But as I live a more active life than most people who have this illness, he agrees I should carry on doing what I'm doing.

What is your answer to the sceptics argument that homeopathy produces, at most, only a placebo effect?

● I was given homeopathy as a sick two year old. My health improved dramatically and out of a group of ten children in my physio group, I was the only child who had boundless energy. How can a



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two year old be subject to a placebo effect? A few years ago I gave a talk at a parliamentary event for young people with arthritis. There were about 50 arthritis sufferers all under the age of 30. I was the only one with no deformities. I was also the only one who had been treated with homeopathy from a very young age. I would ask the sceptics to explain this without using the word “coincidence”. Some things just cannot be explained; and as far as I’m concerned not everything needs to be explained. I don’t need scientific proof in order for me to believe homeopathy works. Feeling well is the only evidence any patient needs.

Do you use any other forms of complementary medicine or therapy?

- The wonderful thing about the RLHIM is that it offers a whole range of integrated therapies. I see Dr Tariq Khan for podiatry and I use his excellent Marigold treatment which corrected the slight deformities that were starting to appear in my toes. I see Dr Raj Sharma for hypnotherapy and CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy). I have Cranio-sacral therapy with Dr Weissner and I’m now also being seen in the insomnia clinic to help with my sleep problems. I also meditate as I believe I need to keep

my mind clear and strong in order to stay healthy.

Has your condition affected your career in anyway?

● When I left school I went to performing arts school as I had dreams about being an actress and director. This is when I got really sick and ended up in a wheelchair, so I was unable to go to university to study acting and directing. However, I have since had some small acting roles in films, TV shows and

However, I now believe that moderation is the best approach. You shouldn't deprive your body of what it wants but you should limit everything. I don't eat lots of bread, maybe once or twice a week, but I don't cut it out. I have lactose free milk instead of full dairy milk. I eat a lot of fresh vegetables and not too much red meat, but like I said – a little of everything. I try to eat lots of fish and I make sure I drink plenty of water and herbal teas, such as fennel tea as it is good for cleansing.

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theatre. Six years ago I studied interior design and have worked in this field ever since, alongside working as a presenter for a west London radio station for two years.

I still have arthritic flare-ups a few times a year, so find it very difficult to work for someone else as some mornings I have a lot of difficulty getting up and moving around quickly, especially in the winter. I used to work for a great interior design company where I got to travel, but following a flare-up which stopped me going in to the office for three weeks, I lost my job. So I decided to start my own business, JayLa Enterprises, where I can work from home designing house interiors, although I sometimes get asked to do offices and showrooms too.

In April this year I published my autobiography “My Enemy, My Friend”, which tells the story of my life with arthritis: the low points I have reached; the trouble I've had with the hospital system; but how, ultimately, I came through it with the help of integrated medicine and a strong family.

Do you follow a regular diet?

● When my illness was very bad I cut out wheat, dairy and sugar, as well as some vegetables and fruits that are supposed to be bad for arthritis.

Why did you want to become a trustee for the BHA?

● As you can probably tell, I feel that I owe a lot to homeopathy and believe passionately in the benefits it can bring. If more people saw it as a first instead of a last resort, I'm convinced as a nation we would be much healthier. Being a trustee will enable me to play some small part in promoting homeopathy to a much wider audience.

What do you hope to contribute as a BHA trustee?

● I was invited to apply to become a trustee because I'm a youthful, energised patient. At 26 I'm much younger than many of the other trustees, so I may see things in a different way which should allow me to offer a different perspective on the issues facing homeopathy. As I can relate to the younger generation, I'm hoping I can help to raise the profile of homeopathy among younger people and possibly motivate them into taking an active part in promoting the health benefits it offers.

I was also asked because I have a lifetime of experience of homeopathy, so I know what it's like to undergo treatment for a chronic illness. A lot of the people we want to reach out to will have chronic illnesses so it is very important

to have someone who can relate to them. I also want to help organise fundraising events, hopefully an annual event that we will begin working on soon. Lastly, I believe that in order for patients to trust homeopathy fully, all homeopaths need to be regulated and this is one of the things I hope to work on as a trustee. There is a lot of work to be done and these things will take years, but I'm hoping to be here for a long time.

Do you encourage your friends to use homeopathy?

● Of course! I encourage everyone around me to use it, especially friends who have children. Some people will listen, others will not. But I do get frustrated when friends who have seen how homeopathy has helped me, and agree that it is amazing, will not try it themselves when they are sick. I even give my dog Milo homeopathy. He's a two year old German Spitz (very small and fluffy!) and at the moment he's taking Bryonia for a cough that he gets due to an inflamed windpipe.

What are your plans for 2011?

● I am half-way through writing my second book and I hope to have it published before the end of the year. I also have a second meeting at the Houses of Parliament as I'm now working with Stephen Dorrell MP, Chair of the Health Select Committee, to improve paediatric care in the NHS. My aim is to eventually make counselling and emotional support available to all children with chronic illnesses and to their families. I believe this is a huge factor in them remaining healthy as they get older. I spent my late teenage years rebelling against my illness because I didn't understand it and had never spoken about it. If support had been available when I was younger, then that time of my life might not have been so difficult. I also plan to do a lot of work for the BHA in 2011 and, on top of all this, continue running my business.

How do you like to relax?

● I find meditating very relaxing and spirituality is a big passion of mine. I am very much into films and I love reading. But I'm possibly most relaxed when I take my dog, Milo, for a walk in the park.

Travel also plays a big part in my life. I love seeing and exploring new places, as well as giving myself time to unwind. I think everyone needs to take time off to chill out.