

MAGIC WAND

By Dr Jon Stamford

It started out more as a symbol than as a practical aid. I have been aware that my walking has deteriorated over the last six months. Indeed that and a substantial increase in tremor are the principal outward manifestations of a progression of my Parkinson's.

The tremor is a nuisance but it does at least mark you out as different. Unsteady gait on the other hand is so often dismissed as the product of too fond a liking for the grape. Eventually it becomes tiresome, having to either endure or challenge the comical prejudices of outsiders. It takes too long to explain to every tittering halfwit that you are not drunk but have Parkinson's disease. You need some kind of shorthand. And for me, the best way of avoiding critical or derisive comment is to carry a stick.



The stick legitimises the most Python-esque of silly walks. No matter how unsteady I am, lurching or half running, stumbling and staggering, the stick says "it's okay, the owner of this stick is allowed to walk like this". And that's how it started out – one particularly unsteady week and one too many people laughing at my tiptoe shuffling walk were enough. I resolved to carry a stick from then on.

A stick is like a magic wand – it opens doors. Literally. People will hold the door for you where previously they would have happily let it close in front of you. People stand aside to let you get on the train first where previously they might have brushed you aside or tut-tutted at your selfish impediment to their progress.

The stick finds seats. Whereas formerly I would stand on commuter trains when no seats were available, now I find I am offered a seat. Instead of facing a phalanx of defiantly raised broadsheets, I am offered a seat. Sometimes more than one! People practically fall over themselves to help. And all because of my magic wand.

My disability is neither greater nor lesser because of the stick. I do not go from able-bodied to cripple simply because I carry a stick. Except of course in people's perception. Where I have in essence a badge, the stick, I am someone to be treated

more kindly. And the converse is of course also true. Where I have no stick, I have no right to a seat on a train, no right to expect people to open doors and no right to get in your way as you hurry onto your commuter trains home.

But what does this say about us and society? For me, it highlights not the helpfulness of people toward the disabled so much as society's indifference (intolerance even) of those whose disabilities are not immediately visible. In other words, many people with Parkinson's. Do we have to carry a stick to mark us out as different and worthy of your help?

And where once it was a symbol of my infirmity, now it is a part of me. I travel with it more often than not. What once was token is now another limb. And like my blue badge, it is another unwanted Rubicon crossed. But also a major help. And I've learnt that whatever the motivation, help is not something to rail against. Grumpy rejection of offers of assistance help no one.

Rather like Harry Potter I did not choose my stick – it chose me. I was clearing out cupboards at my father's house after his death and as I opened one under the stairs, a stick fell out into my hand. Made of oak and more than half a century old it had belonged to my parents and grandparents before them.

It's not a walking stick. Think of it as a magic wand.