

Zap the habit!

Laser therapy helped Anne Penman give up smoking. Now she uses it to help others

By Nicola Barry

Anne Penman used to smoke 60 fags a day. Now she runs a string of clinics throughout the UK to help stop people smoking, using the latest laser therapy.

For 20 years Anne worked as a barmaid in her parents' successful pub in Northern Ireland. A heavy smoker since the age of 21, it was rare to see her without a fag between her lips.

Now, from her smoke-free office in Glasgow's Shawlands, Anne says: "The pubs were so bad a decade or so ago. They were just a thick haze – you couldn't even see across the room. I smoked 60 cigarettes a day. I thought it was normal – everyone else did."

Anne took up smoking to prove a point. She'd been on a blind date, and her new boyfriend had said he thought women who didn't smoke were boring.

"As soon as he said that I had a cigarette," says Anne. "I was earning and I could afford to smoke a lot, so I did."

One evening a young man came into the pub. He and Anne got on well – and both smoked heavily. Ron, who managed a double glazing firm, was a 40-a-day man who soon became a regular customer. The pair married, and Ron eventually came to work in the pub too.

But his years of puffing were beginning to tell. His family had a history of heart disease, and when he went for a medical in November 1987, doctors discovered he had a blocked artery. He underwent angioplasty surgery and was advised to make drastic changes to his lifestyle – including stopping smoking.

He tried to give up, but it wasn't long before he was puffing away once again.

Anne is ashamed to admit that she didn't even try to stop. "I told myself that my heart wasn't the problem. I actually rationalised that I should continue smoking because I was under such a strain from having a sick husband."

One day in January 1988, Anne woke at four o'clock in the morning to find Ron using his angina spray.

"He used to wake up, use his angina spray – and then light up a cigarette. But this time he was lying right over the side of the bed, complaining of feeling ill. I put on the bedside light and saw that he was ashen – suffering from severe chest pain. Sweat was dripping off him."

Anne phoned the doctor, who arrived minutes later. He said Ron had actually suffered his heart attack just after midnight.

"Ron was very ill for three days, and in hospital for 10. The doctors said there had been too much damage to perform bypass surgery.

Ron came home and mulled things over. He thought to himself: "My father and brother died young – so what's the point of giving up smoking?"

So, for the next four years, he smoked more than ever. Anne felt she might as well keep puffing too.

Ron's condition deteriorated. By now he had constant angina, and before long he had to give up his golf, his job – everything. For four years he sat in a corner and did nothing – and doctors refused to perform surgery on his heart because he "wasn't a priority patient". In other words, Ron Penman was a smoker.

For Anne, life was increasingly fraught. "In bed at night I used to check he was still breathing," she says. "I'd phone him every so often from work, and if he didn't answer I'd fly into a total panic."

"Ron would have an angina attack and then go to sleep, leaving me lying awake in a terrible state.

"Then, on Valentine's Day in 1991, he had severe chest pains again. He looked awful. I phoned the GP and he was taken to hospital – with his pyjamas, just in case they decided to keep him in.

"I drove him to the hospital," recalls Anne. "And on that journey he had his last cigarette. He left the car to go to casualty while I went off to park. A message came over the tannoy calling me inside because

Ron had suffered a massive coronary.

"He was in intensive care for two weeks and spent 10 weeks on the ward. He couldn't get out of bed. He couldn't do anything."

Ron has since had a triple heart bypass – and has given up smoking. But while

he was still in hospital, he told Anne she'd have to stop smoking to help him.

"I said I'd stopped," said Anne. "I lied. But the weeks were going past and I knew he was coming home soon. I was beginning to panic."

"I'd read about a woman in Belfast doing laser therapy to stop people smoking. I went to see her on a Wednesday in April 1991, and

went back for a booster on the Friday. I haven't had a cigarette since."

Laser treatment is gentle – like acupuncture without the needles. It is absolutely painless and leaves the recipient feeling full of energy.

The treatment involves lying back on a reclining chair while the laser is applied. The laser device is shaped rather like a chunky biro, with a tip at the end from which the beam emerges. This soft tip is run over the ears, nose, hands and wrists – a group of acupuncture points which stimulate endorphins.

Nicotine also increases endorphin levels – but they plummet quickly once the cigarette is finished. Laser treatment helps increase the amount of endorphins in the body, which in turn helps the person feel calm during nicotine withdrawal.

It was her dramatic transformation from 60-a-day puffer to non-smoker that made Anne think about learning to perform the treatment herself. In the end, the fact her husband had almost died convinced her.

She decided on a career switch, and trained in laser therapy at the same Belfast clinic where she'd received her treatment. In 1992, she came to Glasgow – and she's never left.

Magic pen: it looks like a chunky biro, but Anne's laser has helped hundreds of Scots stop smoking

"We only intended to stay a short time to try out the therapy here," she laughs. "Ron's niece found us a room on the south side of the city – we took it for four weeks and we've been here ever since!"

Anne's had a "steady and constant" flow of clients from then on. "Interest spread mainly through word of mouth as more and more clients came along," she recalls. "One couple from Dumfries were so keen they wanted to open a clinic in their own area. They trained with me and opened our first branch outside Glasgow." The next two were in Fife and Kirkintilloch. Now there are a total of 14 Anne Penman clinics – including one in Germany.

Along with laser therapy, the clinics also offer a programme of support as well as a helpline. Three major NHS hospitals – in Ayr, Lanarkshire and Glasgow – as well as Glasgow's private Nuffield Hospital also offer Anne's treatment.

As Anne says: "Stopping smoking isn't always the difficult bit. It's becoming a happy non-smoker. Now *there's* a challenge." ●



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