

CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME (Part 1 of 10)

How I Finally Learned Fact from Fable



Today Cayman Net News starts a ten part series on Carpal Tunnel Syndrome written by **Barbara Currie Dailey**. This educational series will run daily for the next two weeks. This series helps to dispel some of the myths related to this condition and includes an interview with a leading Carpal Tunnel Syndrome specialist, Dr Alejandro Badia MD, FACS, who is based in Miami Florida.

It is hoped that this series will be a benefit to the population of the Cayman Islands.

As a writer nothing makes me happier than the act of writing itself. Next comes reader feedback letting me know you enjoy my books or weekly *Flavours of Cayman* cooking columns or have an old family recipe to share.

On the other hand, nothing worries an aging self-employed scribe more than being sidelined or worse, disabled, by a nagging medical problem time or an Advil can't fix. Pain we can't explain frightens us, especially when we're past 55. Time is slipping away too fast with so much left to do—we tend to deny symptoms and hope they go away. That's what I did when I began to lose the use of my right hand early this year.

Ignorance, in more ways than one, is why carpal tunnel syndrome crept up on me. Like many people today, I had the wrong idea of what causes this condition and who its victims were. If the myth that it's caused by typing and other repetitive activities were true, swiping credit cards would have disabled Cayman's population years ago.

Carpal tunnel syndrome develops gradually over time, making it easy for busy older people like me to dismiss its worsening symptoms as part of aging. By the time I decided to get help, "shaking my sleeping right hand awake" throughout the day had become a reflex reaction to frequent numbness and burning sensations. What I excused as a "sprained finger" had become so swollen and painful I couldn't hold a pen without pain radiating throughout my hand.

Not only did I have carpal tunnel syndrome; I had also developed an extremely painful condition called trigger finger—a problem whose symptoms have the same underlying cause. By that time surgery was my only treatment option.

Few people knew, or believe me now just weeks later, because my recovery time was so short and the surgical scars barely noticeable.

Surprised? I certainly was.

As readers know, I haven't missed a column dead-



Dr. Alejandro Badia in surgical scrubs

line this year. Considering that each week's column is made fresh and requires not only hours of typing (some call it writing), but also recipe testing and my amusing food photography of edible props—that's a startling testimonial to my treatment. I confess to needing a kitchen helper the first few weeks after surgery, when it was too soon for lifting cast iron skillets, grating coconut or cutting a breadfruit. My husband Jim is a very handy guy.

I decided to share my story because I believe readers will benefit from what I learned "better late than never" about this widely misunderstood condition. Knowing the truth about carpal tunnel syndrome can prevent it from becoming the *painful truth* if you act soon enough.

And there's another reason: I'm angry. First, with myself, a writer whose intuition and investigative instincts are usually acute, for failing to fact-check my "information" on this subject and accepting carpal tunnel mythology as pathology. But I'm even angrier with those who profit from perpetrating those myths about carpal tunnel syndrome, taking advantage of a gullible public by peddling useless "cures" or medically worthless advice. These hucksters rob people of time, money and potentially, their health by steering them away from seeking an accurate diagnosis and medically sound treatment.

Have I struck a nerve? If so, I hope you'll keep reading.

(A separate series, "Dr Badia Explains the Truth About Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, which will commence in Friday's Weekender edition, is based on recent interviews with Dr. Alejandro Badia, my doctor and an internationally renowned orthopedic surgeon and hand specialist at the Miami Hand Center in Miami,



Several simple tests including the Phalen's test shown here are part of the complete physical exam to determine carpal tunnel syndrome.

FL. He presents the facts about carpal tunnel syndrome and treatment options available.)

Misconceptions and Stubbornness Delayed Treatment

I never suspected carpal tunnel syndrome. That numbness and pain in my right hand and weakness around the base of the thumb was just arthritis or one of the surprises of getting older. At least that's what I told myself.

What finally got my attention and penetrated my high pain threshold began as a betrayal by my right index finger, that critical and under-appreciated tool of both writer and cook. Between New Year's and Easter this year it got "peculiar:" stiff and swollen, finally morphing into a painful parody of a sausage. It made simple things terribly painful and interfered with everything I need or like to do. Buttons became a nemesis and kitchen tools, my enemy. I adapted my work routine with fumbling two-fingered typing and scribbling big letters when I tried to write long-hand. Eventually, my signature looked like a forgery. My bank's fraud unit even called once to verify a check's authenticity.

Stubbornly, I ignored it—until one morning, while in the kitchen trying to prepare the props for my weekly cooking column. I couldn't open a can of coconut milk—using a manual can opener triggered what felt like an electric jolt. Pain shot from my swollen finger down the palm of my hand, through the wrist and all the way to my brain. Then I discovered I couldn't bend my index finger enough to press my digital camera's shutter or control buttons without excruciating pain. That was the last straw.

Later, trying to hide my growing panic, I called two friends in South Miami's agricultural community for

help. When it comes to choosing doctors, I rely heavily on "second opinions" from friends with positive first-hand experiences. I recalled hearing about family and employees who had suffered from accidents within the past few years, among them a serious hand injury from a machete.

I said I had a "bad finger," probably a dislocated joint or sprained tendon. Both friends suggested I call the Miami Hand Center and Dr. Alejandro Badia, M.D, an orthopedic surgeon specializing in hand and upper extremity injuries. The office was close to Baptist Hospital in Kendall.

Like many otherwise intelligent people, I also consulted Dr. Google for advice, even though I recognized the internet as The Wild West of medical quackery, where it's always open season on common sense. There, self-help treatments and New Age "cures" ambush educated people who should know better.

But I was too worried to take detours and my search was specific. Right away I found links to Dr. Badia's interactive website, www.drbadia.com, and The Miami Hand Center, www.miamihand.com. Both offered detailed information about his credentials, qualifications and the facilities at Miami Hand Center, where Dr. Badia was listed one of four orthopedic surgeons and one plastic surgeon specializing in surgery of the hand and upper limb, including shoulder.

I was relieved to discover both sites were free from spin, like suspicious patient testimonials from "Mary S." and "Bob M." and pharmaceutical pop up ads. Google also turned up Dr. Badia's *Ask the Expert* column in the online edition of the *Miami Herald*. He provided concise answers to questions about hand and upper extremity problems submitted via e-mail by readers—without any underlying sales pitch or claim that "only Dr. Badia can make you feel better." All of this inspired confidence.

Further information revealed that Dr. Badia is an internationally respected authority on carpal tunnel syndrome who lectures frequently worldwide, including at prestigious medical institutions like the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN. That was interesting, but really didn't concern me.

However, with such strong qualifications and my friends' recommendations, I was certain Dr. Badia could fix my finger. I called the number on the website and because I was an overseas patient (and probably sounded panicky) the receptionist was understanding and let me jump the queue with an appointment for the following week.

Tomorrow, part two of the series highlights Ms Dailey's visit to the Miami Hand Center Waiting Room and her first visit with Dr Alejandro Badia.