

Dr Chris Steele

From the surgery to TV

By Eve Menezes Cunningham

Dr Chris Steele still seems surprised to have gone from talking to one person for ten minutes to reaching millions through This Morning and other TV slots.

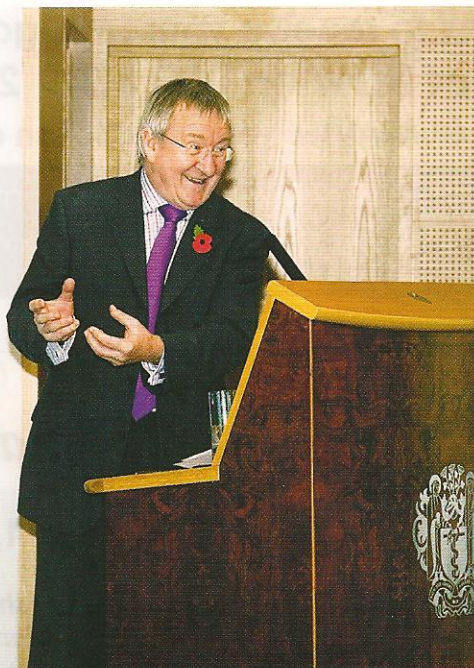
He was recently awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Guild of Health Writers and remains modest about all the people he's helped keep healthier.

Dr Steele always wanted to be a doctor but never imagined he'd spend so much time on TV. "I was Richard and Judy's GP when I first started on This Morning but that wasn't the only reason. I've been qualified over 40 years. 30 years ago, I did work to help people stop smoking and became recognised as an international expert on smoking cessation.

"Apparently, they'd tested several doctors and eventually asked the producers, 'Have you tried our GP?' Their producers were like, 'Who the hell...?' but I had television experience. Once I was on national TV, patients never questioned what I did. That was a change I noticed. My patients would be boasting, 'That's my GP!'"

At the Guild of Health Writers Awards, Dr Chris mentioned the long struggle before he was allowed to show women how to check themselves for possible breast cancer. The pink ribbon climate we know today didn't exist and there was a lot of resistance. But once he was allowed to do a segment, the phone lines were flooded with grateful callers. Still, he says, it took a really long time before he was allowed to show men how to check themselves for potential signs of testicular cancer.

"You've just got to dig your heels in," he says. "Because I was working in smoking cessation, I ran two very big smoking clinics here in the teaching hospital in Manchester. I was teaching them long before nicotine gum came out. I started prescribing it even though we were told it couldn't be prescribed on the NHS. They cut the cost of these prescriptions off my salary. I ended up in a tribunal against Norman Fowler, then Secretary of State. I won, he appealed and I won the



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appeal. That was a difficult time. Dogged determination got me through. I disagreed completely. I'm a Geordie. We can be quite obstinate. That was a major challenge which dragged on for years.

"My next big one was This Morning. I've been on 21 years now since first day but at first, I was terrified doing live television phone ins. If a fashion expert makes a mistake, it doesn't matter. But giving medical advice, you can't make a mistake. You don't know what they're going to ask or have their medical notes."

Apart from the births of his four children, Dr Steele says getting his MBE a few years ago has been his biggest highlight. "Visiting the Queen. That was awesome, that was. Don't ask what she said to me - I can't remember. Apparently, that's quite common. Getting the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Guild of Health Writers was another highlight.

Getting Health Writer of the Year a few years ago. Qualifying as a doctor, getting married, doing This Morning and beating the government."

Of his four children, one is a musician and another is an athlete. "My wife's a nurse. We said to them, 'What do you like

doing? If that gives you enjoyment and you can put a roof over your head and food on your table, you're very lucky.' And both my sons are doing that."

Dr Steele was recently diagnosed with Coeliac Disease. "Coeliac disease means you're reacting to gluten," he says. "You can't tolerate it. Therefore you have to go onto a strict gluten free diet for life. Gluten is hidden in wheat and wheat products. Bread, pizza, pasta, pastries, cakes, biscuits but also unexpectedly in fish fingers, sausages and things like that. I'm 65 so for 64 years I was eating normally and then you've got to change those eating habits. You've got to. If you don't you get the stomach aches. I was very aware of what coeliac can do.

"At first, the specialist thought it was IBS so I got treatment for IBS and didn't get any better. I don't have IBS. The specialist did blood tests



and a biopsy so my message is, if you're diagnosed with IBS and given treatment and not improving after a couple of months, go back to the doctor and ask about possible diagnosis of coeliac disease. It's a very simple blood test for coeliac – tTG blood test.

"The odd thing is that I've been the Ambassador for Coeliac UK for four years. I'm going to resign from sexually transmitted diseases!" he joked. He is also a patron for charities raising awareness about bowel cancer and meningitis as he likes to use his high profile to raise awareness and, hopefully, save lives.

"Before you go to the doctor, write down the questions you want to ask. If you're getting results, take someone with you. They might be saying you've got a tumour and you need someone there who can

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take in what's being said. Ask your doctor to write down results."

When I asked

what he wished he'd known when he was first starting out as a doctor, he said, "I wish I'd known a lot more medicine. OK, you've done the medical course, five or six years, and think you know it all: Going from being a student to a respected member of society. But you know nothing at all. The more you learn the more you realise you don't know." ■

Find out more about Dr Chris at www.thefamilygp.com Learn more about Coeliac UK at www.coeliac.org.uk

Read Coeliac Disease: What you need to know (Sheldon, £7.99, out in May) by Alex Gazzola (with a Foreword by Dr Steele).