Oren Liebermann, a CNN correspondent based in Jerusalem, was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in February, 2014. Type 1 diabetes interrupted a year-long travel adventure and Oren’s diagnosis was revealed just after he tackled the Annapurna Base Camp trek in Nepal. It was there that Oren and his wife realised life might never be the same when they returned to the US to assess Oren’s health and learn more about diabetes. Wanting desperately to get back to the travel adventure they had dreamed up and planned, Oren decided that his diabetes wasn’t going to prevent him from doing the things he loved. Within one month he and his wife were back on the road prepared for another 6-months of travel with all the required insulin and supplies. Oren writes about his travel experience and diabetes in his first book, *The Insulin Express*, available in May 2017. *Diabetes Voice* had the chance to meet Oren and ask him about his book, type 1 diabetes and life as an international correspondent.

**Why did you write The Insulin Express?**

I wanted to write a book, especially as a reporter, about travelling around the world but I didn’t know what was compelling about my story. Then I got diagnosed with type 1 diabetes and I thought my story had just become compelling, although not in the way I wanted it to be! Parts of writing *The Insulin Express* were very difficult but it was a catharsis for me. Even today, I can feel the IV that was put on my right hand when I was first diagnosed in Nepal. I still don’t know that I have dealt with everything about developing diabetes but it was important for me to put it all down and share my experience with others. Everyone with type 1 diabetes has been there – we all have our diagnosis story. Writing the book was a part of the healing process for me.

**Why did you name your book The Insulin Express?**

The original title was “Home is a verb” which for me was excellent because it reflects the idea that “home” is active, moving. My editor convinced me to change it. I am glad we called it *The Insulin Express*, because the most important decision I made was to get right back on the road after I developed diabetes and continue travelling. My wife and I had been travelling for six months when the trip was interrupted by my diagnosis. We had six more months to go! After my diagnosis, it would have been so easy to say “I am staying home – hanging it up.” I couldn’t do that. After talking to my doctor, we decided that we could safely continue with my type 1 diabetes if I planned and prepared for everything.
Oren and his wife at the beginning of their trip and before the diabetes diagnosis.
I believe if I had given into accepting perceived limitations, then there’s a good chance I would have always felt limited with diabetes. I am proud to be on the road with diabetes.

Before you were diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in 2014, were you aware of any type of diabetes? Had you ever known or met someone with diabetes?

No one in my family has diabetes, and I knew nothing about the condition. I had a friend in high school who had type 1 diabetes, but I have to admit, I just didn’t get it. He had a pump and sometimes he had lows and would need to eat sugar, but I was completely ignorant about what he needed or why. In college, my Resident Advisor also lived with type 1 diabetes but like I said I had no understanding of it. Fortunately for me, these friends reached out to me during and after my diagnosis. Having a network of people who understand diabetes is very important.

During your travels, your story looks back in time and allows the reader to see a trend. As you made your way around the world, your wife comments on your weight-loss; in Bangkok, your constant thirst is blamed on the heat; and finally in Nepal, a friend says you have all the classic symptoms of diabetes but you decide that it just can’t be. The first Nepalese doctor you see diagnoses you with a minor infection, gives you antibiotics, and tells you to “drink more juice and eat chicken.” Of course, this fails. What do you think is going on here?

In terms of thirst it was easy to write it off. In the desert in Israel, I was drinking a lot of water and it seemed natural to be thirsty there. I was drinking a lot so I had to go to the bathroom a lot. When we were in Thailand the heat was the hottest I had ever experienced in my life with temperatures around 105 degrees fahrenheit and I was sweating so it seemed logical I was really thirsty. It was the dry season in Nepal so again it seemed natural that I would be dehydrated.

In terms of weight loss, I didn’t think I had lost so much weight but now that I look back, it was dramatic. I had lost 40-45 lbs over the space of two months. I didn’t think much of it then; I was eating less and exercising a lot. Plus, there was so much to do and we were on the road. We were busy and there wasn’t time to waste. In Nepal, when I didn’t know what was wrong we reached out to a few doctors at home who had known me my whole life and they said, “It sounds like symptoms of diabetes but there’s just no way you have it.” I had no family history so it just didn’t seem to make sense. Even the doctors in Nepal were confused at first. Once they saw my glucose was so high, we all knew - but the questions didn’t end there. “Does he have type 1 diabetes or type 2 diabetes?” As soon as the Nepalese endocrinologist saw me and realised I had developed diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA), she knew. There was just no question I had developed type 1 diabetes as an adult.

You describe your type 1 diabetes diagnosis as a very “dark” time and you discuss the intensity of your emotions in detail. What were you feeling in those first days of diagnosis, and how has your understanding about your health and type 1 diabetes changed today?

It was like being on a roller coaster those first days. I couldn’t really process it. Things have changed but it’s not like it has been all positive. I am not always in the perfect range. There have been a lot of highs and lows and I am certainly not glad I have diabetes. However, type 1 diabetes is one of the most manageable chronic diseases you can have and if you respect it and handle it well, it shouldn’t slow you down or stop you in any way. Diabetes hasn’t prevented me from doing anything. It’s also changed me in ways for the better -- it’s motivated me to eat healthier. If my book brings greater understanding and makes someone smile enough to realize that with diabetes you can still do anything you want with good planning, then for me the book has succeeded.
Now that you have seen much of the world including areas that have poor healthcare resources such as villages in Kenya and remote locations in Southeast Asia, I wonder what you think about people who live in these areas who also have to struggle with serious chronic conditions like diabetes?

I had the luxury of 1st world medical care within days of my diagnosis after I flew home to be with my family in the US. I can’t imagine what it’s like to need insulin and not having access. I certainly want to help and it’s important to bring diabetes care and education and raise money for diabetes supplies to places in need. I certainly felt vulnerable being diagnosed with a serious condition in Nepal but even in that situation I had an advantage. The first doctor I saw was in the tourist area in a very basic clinic, but he was far, far too expensive for the locals. He misdiagnosed me at first and given my experience with first-rate medical care, I knew he had missed something. So I went back and I wasn’t going to leave his clinic without a blood test. I may have not known to go back to see that doctor if I hadn’t grown up with great healthcare. We were in the clinic for four nights which included very basic food, treatment, the bed, doctor visits and supplies which cost just under $200 US. The locals couldn’t afford this and they would take a sleeping mat in the lobby of the clinic and that’s how they stayed over night. If I had been from a local family and had not gone back to see the doctor because I had no more money, then I can see how I might not have survived. I was on the trajectory to be in very bad shape with DKA and without that blood test, I could have passed out in a coma, nowhere near medical care. Given the situation, I was very lucky.

Although you don’t discuss your work as a CNN correspondent in The Insulin Express how do you balance the chaos of international broadcast news with the need to self-manage type 1 diabetes?

It was important for me to be honest with my colleagues. When I joined the CNN bureau in Jerusalem, I pulled the team together and told them about my type 1 diabetes. I showed them the glucagon kit and what to do for extreme hypoglycaemia, and explained if I ever passed out to call the paramedics right away. It’s not always easy to get the right balance. It can be tough on busy days to do everything I need to for diabetes. When I had to cover the funeral of Israel’s former Prime Minister, we were out all day and it can be tough to accommodate testing and eating. I am fortunate, my work environment is very supportive and my boss is extremely sensitive. I am very comfortable about having diabetes at CNN.

What’s next for you? When is your next trip?

We have been to 40 countries – but we still have a list of places to visit. In 2018, we are planning to climb Mt Kilimanjaro which will take a good deal of planning for my diabetes. I also need to add that one day I will return to Nepal to thank my host family there for helping us through such a difficult time. Given I climbed and reached Annapurna Base Camp sick with undiagnosed type 1 diabetes, I want to do it again but this time experience it with my health.

For more information:
The Insulin Express website
www.insulinexpress.com
Oren Lieberman’s official Facebook page
https://www.facebook.com/orenliebermannnews/

Oren with his IV after being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes