Testimony of

Ms. Jean Smart
Actress

At the Hearing Entitled

“Diabetes Research: Reducing the Burden of Diabetes at All Ages and Stages”

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Senators Nelson and Collins and members of the committee, thank you so very much for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss an issue that all of these great kids, their families and I know all too well; living life with Type I Diabetes. I was actually here in Washington DC in 1964. I was 13 and…go ahead do the math, waiting to visit the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier with my family. I was starting to show the telltale signs of Diabetes. I was very tired and so parched I couldn't drink enough liquid to slake my thirst. It was over 100 degrees that day in August, so naturally my parents put it down to the heat. But later, after stopping at nearly every gas station restroom on the drive home from DC to Seattle, and losing almost 20 lbs. in a matter of weeks, my parents knew something was terribly wrong. Shortly after we got home we went to the doctor where I learned I had Type I Diabetes. It came as quite a shock to me as well as my parents as you can imagine. I remember the nurse very quietly offering smelling salts to my poor Daddy; he didn't look so good. No one in my family had the disease and no one could remember anyone in the family who had ever had it. All I knew about Diabetes was: you couldn't eat sugar and you had to take shots. Quite a life sentence to a scared child. But by the end of that first day I was injecting myself, then after spending five days in the hospital I was sent home on a strict sugar-free diet. I was also told to not consider having children, ever. That statement came back to haunt me years later. Forty eight years ago there were no blood-glucose meters or continuous glucose monitors.

Instead, people with Diabetes had to assess what their blood sugar levels were by performing urine tests. They weren't very accurate but it was the best we had at the time. As for the syringes, they were very large and had to be reused, which made for some pretty painful injections in my skinny 13 year old thighs. Plus, they had to be sterilized in a pot of boiling water before each use. Luckily today, we have much shorter, finer disposable needles. But even with the advent of devices like the insulin pump it is far from where we hope to be. My friend Beverly has realized much better blood sugars with the pump, but is still subject to frightening highs and lows if she is not ever-vigilant. I did my best to manage my Diabetes while growing up and did not let it define me. I have never thought of myself as a "sick" person but ironically my Diabetes is largely the reason I became an actress. I had my sights set on attending a university on the other side of the state which offered no degree in Drama but had a wonderful speech department. However, my Mom had other ideas. She wanted me to go to the University of Washington since it was closer to home. I studied at U.W for five years earning a BFA in acting and from there my career was launched. In 1989 I was enjoying life as a working actress when I found out that I was pregnant. My husband and I were panic-stricken when we were advised to terminate the pregnancy because my sugars had not been in good control and we were reminded of the harm Type I Diabetes could cause the baby and me. But I found a specialist who helped me navigate the next 8 months. I tested my blood glucose levels with a meter, fortunately, twelve times a day and was on the phone daily with my doctor to adjust my insulin needs and those of the baby growing inside me. I also had an extremely supportive husband who immediately turned himself into an expert on pregnant diabetics. It was hard work but luckily for me and my strong, healthy son it paid off. After having Type I Diabetes for so long I am fortunate that I do not have many of the complications that can be a result of this disease. My doctor said I must have been born with some really good genes. Unfortunately, many of my generation who were diagnosed with Diabetes as children have suffered high rates of heart attacks, strokes, blindness, nerve damage, complicated pregnancies and kidney failure. Even those of us with good genes have faced risks every day from the disease. I've had some very scary low blood sugars which, if you've never experienced it, feels a little like drowning. One of my closest calls was while onstage, on Broadway, opposite Nathan Lane, my mouth was still saying the lines but my brain was telling me I was in big trouble. Luckily the scene ended just in time. Since then, I make a habit of stashing jelly beans all over the set. It's hard sometimes to remember what my life was like before Diabetes and, selfishly, I would, of course, love to know what it feels like again to not be diabetic; to go more than just a few hours without thinking about my blood sugar. But what I really pray for is that the next generation of young, beautiful children like these will never know the uncertainty and fears of being diabetic or the physical toll it takes on their bodies. I never made it to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier that day; I didn't have the strength. But because I was lucky enough to be born in the second half of the 20th Century, because of advances in diabetes care and Kay Smart who was afraid to let me leave home for college; I am standing here today able to thank Congress, to thank you and JDRF for all you've done to promote Type I Diabetes research and ask that you please continue your efforts so that very soon we can talk about the day we cured this disease. Thank you.