age of 22, he was living on assistance, looking after his baby daughter while his wife worked part time when he broke out of the cycle. 'The Arthritis Foundation [a national charity] stepped in for me,' he says. My first treatments were at an Arthritis Foundation funded clinic. Without that clinic I wouldn't have had the strength to get a job. Physically, I was disabled. Because I got the medication I needed and I stabilised, I got a job that got me the insurance.'

Insurance is already a worry for 12-year-old Joi Himes, who has lupus. She is currently covered by public health insurance, as she is adopted. Her mother René also got Joi private insurance at the age of three, before she was diagnosed. But she is worried what will happen when Joi reaches 18 and is no longer covered by the public policy.

'I work as a private practitioner and have to buy my own insurance and pre-existing conditions aren't covered,' René says. 'If Joi gets a job working for a big company it would be no problem, but she would be refused by private insurance. She will be able to continue with her existing private insurance, but I don't know what her premiums are going to be like when she gets older.'

While it may be debatable which country has the more effective healthcare system, there is little argument that access tends to be better in America. The Americans with Disabilities act means that public buildings are accessible, as is public transport. The car, however, is king in America so public transport won't necessarily get you where you want to go. But for those with a car there are plenty of parking bays for disabled badge holders.

Jennene: fighting discrimination

The higher profile given to disabled access doesn't mean that Americans are better educated about disabilities than the British. According to David Jacobson the all too familiar problem people with arthritis face of being challenged about their right to park in a disabled bay is just the same in America.

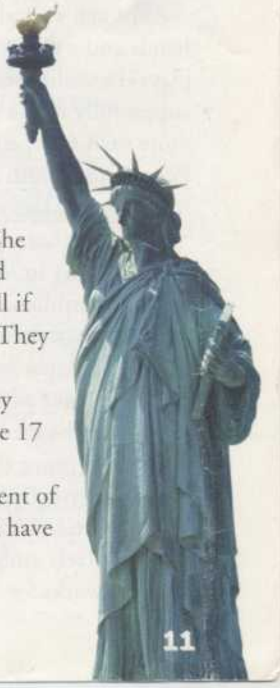
'I've always used it as a point of education,' he says. 'Whenever I get out of my handicapped parking space and someone comes up and says "you can't park there", I give them an education on arthritis. I say there's visible illness and invisible and unless I wave my fingers (all twisted) you're not going to know that I've got this disease.'

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) means that people risk being sued if they do not provide disabled people with services. Jennene Stanley believes that if the act had been in force when she was at school, she wouldn't have had to fight so hard to be allowed to learn the violin.

'When I first wanted to play violin everyone tried to talk me out of it,' she says. 'They said "you're setting yourself up for disappointment". Although their motivations were maybe the best, or not malicious, technically, by law they wouldn't have had to teach me violin.

'My mother fought it, but there's only so far a family can go with that. My mom was a very forward, direct person. She intimated that she would make their life merry hell if they didn't let me do it. They grudgingly accepted.

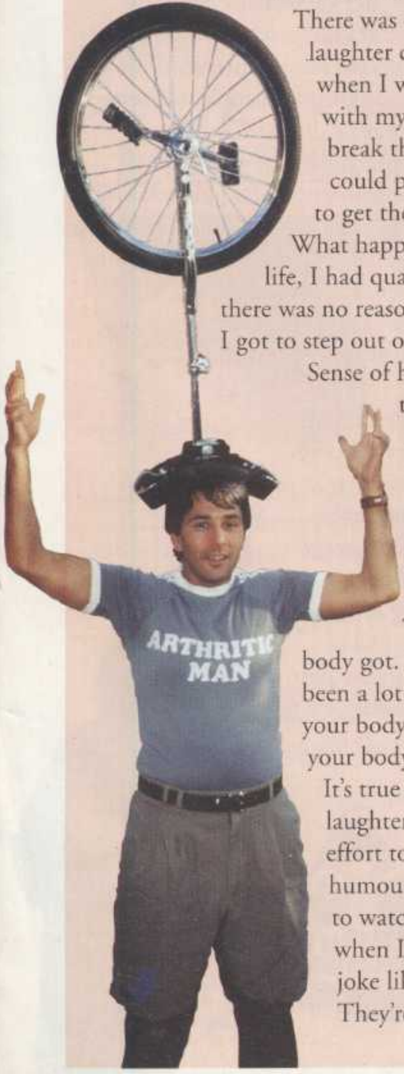
'We Americans are very litigation happy. We have 17 per cent of the world's population and 70 per cent of its lawyers. So when you have the backbone of the law behind you a teacher or



Laughing away the pain

David Jacobson has psoriatic arthritis. He finds that humour helps him deal with his pain, and is a regular speaker on humour therapy.

I was a star athlete in school and college and I thought that athletics was going to be a lifelong career for me. My favourite hobbies were cliff diving and mountain climbing. When I was diagnosed I lost my self confidence and the self esteem that went along with those things.



There was one thing I didn't lose – my sense of humour – and laughter can be very powerful, even life transforming. I was 22 when I was diagnosed and at that time I went back home to live with my mom who did everything for me. My first step to break that pattern was a humorous one. There was no way I could physically beat her to answer the phone, so I managed to get there first and answer it by making her laugh.

What happened was I was laughing, I was experiencing joy in my life, I had quality of life. I realised that even though I had this disease there was no reason why I couldn't enjoy life. That was the first moment I got to step out of my body and look at it from that perspective.

Sense of humour has always been important in my family. By the time I got the arthritis I had already survived several hardships. My father died when I was eight and he had a great sense of humour. It's always been a way of coping. It was strongly developed by the time I was diagnosed, I had just never used it for my health. I found that it is the well that replenishes my positive attitude. It's an unending stream of energy for me.

The more positive my perspective got the healthier my body got. Our thoughts do affect our physical bodies. There's been a lot of research on the negative side of it – stress affecting your body – but not much on the positive side – of it healing your body.

It's true what Norman Cousins said: that 10 minutes of hearty laughter will give you two hours of pain-free sleep. I made an effort to develop a humour library. To get out every book on humour, to tape the Marx Brothers and all the old tapes I like to watch. I have a humour bottle filled with one-liners and when I get a little sore I pop open the bottle and pull out a joke like: 'how do you tell a social worker in a nudist camp? They're the one that's listening instead of looking'.