

Gary Hall Testimony

Good morning. It's an honor and a pleasure to appear before this committee today to speak about the ways juvenile diabetes has impacted my life and the need to find a cure as soon as possible. I want to first thank you, Senator Collins, for all you do as Co-Chair of the Senate Diabetes Caucus and for holding today's hearing.

My name is Gary Hall. Most people know me from my swimming achievements. I am a three-time Olympian, 10-time Olympic medallist, and hold the record as the fastest swimmer in United States history and in organized competition worldwide. Admittedly, though, there are probably people who remember me mainly for smashing a guitar on "The Tonight Show" with Jay Leno.

Swimming is in my genes to some extent—my father, Gary Hall Senior, was also a three-time Olympian. I started swimming really seriously when I was 16, and won my first national title two years later at Junior National Championships. I continued my success at the University of Texas in the mid-1990s and swam at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, where I won four medals. I was feeling really good about my life and where it was going.

But in 1999 I noticed an unsettling change coming over me. I was feeling tired all the time. I had a constant thirst I could not quench. My vision became blurry. Finally, I collapsed one night at a party. That's when I was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes.

The news was a shock, and I was incredibly upset and discouraged. Since there was no history of the disease in my family, you can imagine my disbelief. At the time, I really didn't have a good understanding of diabetes. Like a lot of people, I thought it happened to those who were older, overweight, and didn't get enough exercise. I just didn't understand how this could have happened because I, on the other hand, had spent my entire life eating right, exercising, and minding my health. I was an Olympic athlete.

After getting out of the hospital, the first thing I did was go home to my computer and look up as much on the disease as I could find. I learned that my pancreas had been attacked by my own immune system, preventing me from converting food into energy. I also learned that I would have to take insulin shots constantly just to stay alive.

As far as competitive swimming went, I had no idea if I would be able to continue. It was an earth-shattering moment for me, because I had gone through so much and felt that I was at my peak physically. I had overcome so much opposition and had put in a long and tough season after the Atlanta Olympics, battling a shoulder injury. My diagnosis came one week before I was to compete in the season's biggest meet—the Spring Nationals—and all I could do was go away to clear my head.

I ended up going to the mountains of Costa Rica with my wife Elizabeth Peterson. She was incredibly supportive in helping me get through that life-altering week. In Costa Rica, I did a lot more reading about diabetes to gain an even deeper understanding of the disease. It was frightening: I read about people going blind, losing their legs and their kidneys to diabetes.

Sometimes the burden of knowing what the disease could do made me feel destructive. At times like this I would swim offshore into shark-infested waters, figuring the sharks would get me. When nothing happened, I would turn around and swim back. But as time passed, I came to terms with my disease. I knew I needed to accept the circumstances, and I decided I had the opportunity to do something to educate people about the horrible effects of diabetes and the desperate need for a cure.

When I returned to the U.S., I got in touch with Anne Peters, a Los Angeles Endocrinologist, who assured me there was no reason to quit competitive swimming. I decided to go back into serious training, but with a new attitude toward everything. If there's a bright side to this, it's that I no longer take anything for granted, in swimming, or in life in general. I live every day as if it's going to be my last.

I'm happy to say that since my diagnosis, I've continued my swimming success, winning four more medals at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, and another two in 2004 at Athens. But I've also realized I can make an even bigger impact for people with diabetes. I had a chance to encourage millions of people living and suffering with the disease. If I could talk about what I went through and what I have still been able to achieve, I might somehow alleviate the feeling of helplessness and defeat that can overcome a person—more often than not a child—when diabetes is first diagnosed.

Soon after my diagnosis, I became active with the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, and have been a staunch advocate for their research efforts. I'm proud to be here today with these 150 amazing children you see sitting before you, telling you why you must do everything in your power to help find a cure through the best science available to America.

Diabetes is always with us—it's not something you can take a vacation from, even for a day. We have to test our blood sugar 10 to 12 times per day and we rely on insulin as life support. It's a delicate balancing act. We have to constantly calculate the number of carbohydrates we eat, the amount of exercise we get, and the number of insulin injections we need to take to keep our blood sugar in normal range. And still, we lead a life in which we are never more than a few minutes away from dangerous changes in blood sugar levels, or the longer term risks of life-threatening complications.

You all have a power that many of us envy—the ability to control public funds and public policy. We need more funding from Congress for diabetes research so that researchers can take full advantage of all the scientific opportunities that currently exist that may lead to a cure. In addition, it is extremely important that you help expand the current policy on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. Embryonic stem cells represent one of our best hopes for curing type 1 diabetes, and it is disheartening for those of us with disease to see progress delayed by limiting what research can be done with federal funding. When I swam in the Olympics, I was proud to be the best in the field, not for myself, but because I was representing my country. The U.S. has historically been the best and a world leader in scientific discovery. It is incredibly frustrating to see the U.S. falling behind other countries in this promising area of science.

I know first-hand that it is possible to achieve your dreams, even in the face of adversity. I ask you to look around this room at these brave children who struggle to overcome the adversity of diabetes every hour of every day. These kids represent future teachers and doctors, businessmen and businesswomen, mothers and fathers, maybe even a future Olympic athlete or U.S. senator – in short, they represent our future. Please help us to ensure that our collective future is bright by doing all you can to remove the cloud of diabetes that hangs over these children. Join with us in educating Members of Congress about the incredible research opportunities that exist to develop therapies and a cure for juvenile diabetes, including the potential of stem cell research.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.