

Implant offers 'hip for life' hope

As Britain's population ages, more people need hip replacements – but serious problems over their long-term effectiveness often lead to major complications. Now an advance from Sheffield could offer a pain-free future. Health Correspondent **Mike Waites** reports.

JOHN POULTER feared his hiking days were over when he began suffering severe pains in his left leg.

A keen walker, he had pounded the Pennines for nearly half a century, but eventually he was in so much agony he could hardly walk across his office for a cup of coffee.

To his dismay doctors at St James's Hospital in Leeds, who discovered his hip joint was crumbling, told him he was too young and too mobile to receive a traditional cemented hip which would probably need replacing after a decade.

Instead he was told he would have to wait until he was incapacitated before the operation was carried out.

Mr Poulter, who had recently retired from Yorkshire Electricity, decided to invest his lump sum in a new hip and after reading about the technology decided to opt for a replacement implant designed by the late London surgeon Ronald Furlong and made using precision metal-working techniques in Sheffield.

The implant – unlike other traditional replacements – is coated with a biocompatible material which means the artificial hip bonds with

existing bone and even encourages the bone to grow, giving people a more effective replacement.

For many younger people needing a new hip, the long-term success of the operation is crucial.

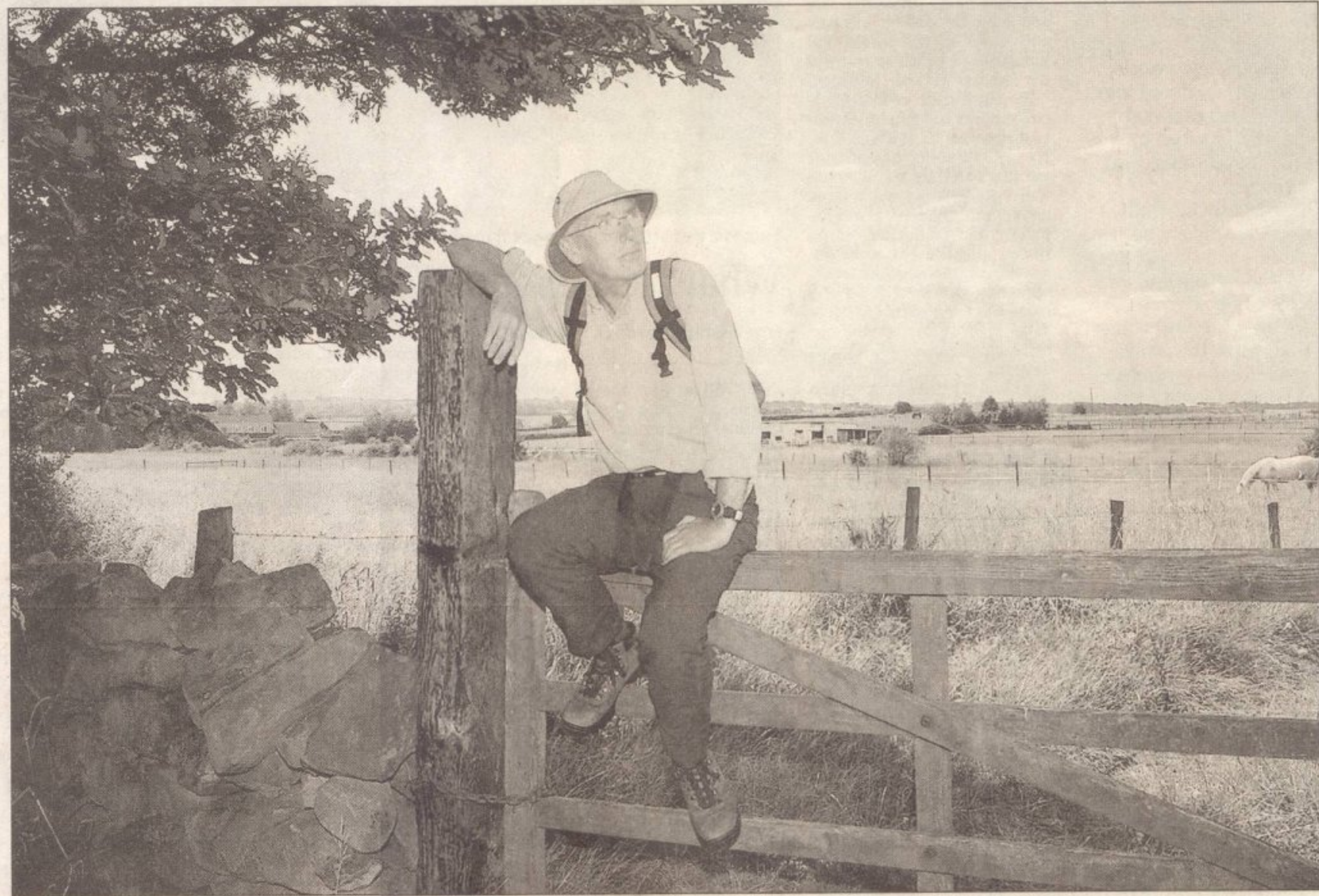
About 43,000 hip replacements are carried out in the country each year, making it one of the commonest procedures carried out by the National Health Service.

About 80 per cent of operations use the traditional cement type, which binds the joint to the thigh bone, although this eventually begins to break and disintegrate on average after about 12 years.

A second, technically more difficult operation is carried out to fit another implant, but in as many as one in five cases this proves unsuccessful. No further surgery can be performed and if the hip fails again, patients are left confined to a wheelchair.

New research carried out among 55 patients at Dewsbury and District Hospital suggests the Furlong hip could offer patients a hip to last a lifetime.

The study by a team led by consultant orthopaedic surgeon Peter Angus found the implants had proved success-



New lease of life: Above and below, John Poulter, from Cookridge, Leeds, is striding out again after his hip operation.

Pictures: Simon Hulme

ful in all but one case over the last 15 years.

Mr Angus said: "So far the results are excellent but it is something we will have to keep an eye on and we will only know if it does have advantages in years to come.

"The problem with traditional cemented hips is that if you put them into young patients then it's almost a foregone conclusion that it will not outlive the patient.

"Young patients want pain-free hips when they are young and increasingly surgeons are under pressure to do something rather than tell them to wait."

The study follows a recent report by the National Audit Office which found that more than 60 different types of hip replacement are used by surgeons sometimes without evidence they actually work in the long term.

A National Joint Registry was set up in April which is expected to provide detailed information about the best types of implant to use as well as comparing and monitoring the performance of hospitals.

The technical director of Furlong hip manufacturer JRI Ltd in Attercliffe, Sheffield, Keith Jackson, said younger patients put a greater strain on their implant and it often wore out quicker.

"The coating on the implant is recognised by the bone in the body and binds with it. New cells form which generates new bone growth," he said.

"We encourage patients to be active as soon as possible after the operation because stress on the bone encourage more cells to bind with the coating."

Mr Poulter, now 63, who had his right hip replaced the year after his first operation in 1998, said he had suffered no ill-effects and was able to begin hiking again – meeting his new wife Lin on the Coast-to-Coast walk across the North of England.

"They really have changed my life. It's a miracle to me because it's just as if they are better than they were before," he said.

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