

In one very quick moment your life can change.

We can never imagine an accident like mine happening and most definitely never to ourselves. I am sure that if I'd ever even thought about having an accident it wouldn't have been a brain injury!

Maybe a broken leg...

As a young child we lived on a farm west of Sydney. I was riding horses at a very young age, I cannot remember actually learning to ride!

Following high school I went on to do a lot of Cross Country Skiing and Kayaking, always liking the longer distances. I competed in a number of European Worldloppet ranging in distance from 90 – 110km and kayaking. I completed the Hawkesbury Classic a 111km race from Windsor to Brooklyn a few times and the Murray Marathon a 400km paddle from Yarrawonga to Swan Hill.

The whole time I kept riding horses because I liked it with a bit of showing and campdrafting.

When I was in my mid twenties I was introduced to endurance by our local vet. This started what has become my whole life. 6 months later I did my first 80km ride, that same year I completed the Tom Quilty in Queensland, driving to the race with kayaks on the roof and bikes in the horse trailer

I found I really enjoyed it and was pretty good at it!

I am sure my skiing and paddling background helped me with pacing and my overall fitness.

I have won 4 Quilties and have 3 team bronze medals from World Championships. I was individual 4<sup>th</sup> in 2002 at the Spanish World Championships

I have always loved flying, in particular helicopters because they are so manoeuvrable. In 2003, I commenced my helicopter license, passing my final exams in 2004. Since then I have gone on to fly a helicopter across Australia all on my own. I have logged up over 750 hours in command.

My accident occurred at the Tumbarumba FEI 100km Endurance Ride on the 12<sup>th</sup> April 2009. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> leg, about 10km from the end of the race I fell from my horse.

I cannot remember any of this day. I was lucky that this happened in sight of a checkpoint. They had recorded my number as I rode through and next spotted a riderless horse with me on the ground.

Yes, I was wearing an approved helmet, the best available. The same helmet our Olympic equestrians wear – did it save my life – I believe it did, could it have been better designed and reduced the severity of my injury? – yes. The basis of all our helmets is 15 -20mm of polystyrene foam worth about 50 cents. With today's technology one wonders if the lining of our helmets should be different, maybe some kind of gel. I do not know what they should be but they shouldn't be like they are.

Very quickly Dr Trish Annetts along with the Tumbarumba Ambulance attended me. Lucky for me that Trish was an FEI official at the ride.

She secured my airways, put a Guedel's airway in my mouth which sits over your tongue and allows air to pass into the back of your throat,

commenced oxygen and monitored the oxygen with a pulse oximeter on my finger. At first my oxygen level was only 87 % but it quickly rose to 100 % with the airway and oxygen. They also put a neck brace on me. It is quite common for Brain Injury victims to die at the accident site from oxygen deprivation.

I was transported by the Snowy River Hydro helicopter to Canberra hospital. I was placed in an induced coma in the ICU, this is done to reduce any stimulation and allow your brain to stabilise. I was in an induced coma for 4 days, on termination of this medication I remained in a coma for another 3 1/2 weeks.

At first I had a breathing tube in my throat with a ventilator breathing for me. This tube was initially inserted at Tumberumba by the medicos in the helicopter to stabilise me for the flight to Canberra. This tube can't stay in more than a few days as it erodes your trachea, so they inserted a tracheotomy and connected this to the ventilator. Also in the emergency theatre a "bolt" was inserted into my skull to monitor brain pressure.

I was in Canberra hospital for about 6 weeks. I have no memory of this time at all.

At the time of the accident my husband Chris was at the Daly River near Darwin, Trish was able to catch him on his mobile. He flew back to Canberra immediately.

The brain can be injured as a result of an accident, stroke, alcohol or drug abuse, tumours, poisoning, infection and disease, near drowning, haemorrhage, AIDS and a number of other disorders such as Parkinson's, Multiple Sclerosis and Alzheimers.

The term acquired brain injury (ABI) is used to describe all types of brain injury that occur after birth. The complications and problems that arise are varied and may include a range of hidden cognitive disabilities such as short term memory loss through to physical difficulties such as fatigue, paralysis, vision and hearing impairments.

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is an acquired brain injury caused by a blow to the head or by the head being forced to move rapidly forward and backward, usually with some loss of consciousness. As a result of this blow or rapid movement brain tissue may be torn, stretched, penetrated, bruised or become swollen. The effects of traumatic brain injury can be temporary or permanent, they range from a mild injury such as being momentarily stunned while playing football, to a very severe injury that may cause prolonged loss of consciousness.

I had a TBI, I fractured my skull above the spinal cord over the top of the cerebellum. I had no other physical injuries. No broken legs, arms or injuries to my back.

The initial prognosis for my recovery was poor. With severe brain injuries, many victims do not survive the first 72 hours. This was very hard for my family at the time as they were coming to grips with an injury they had no knowledge or understanding of.

Each person's brain injury and recovery is unique. Rate and degree of recovery rates vary enormously from one person to another. A person may continue to improve & adapt for many years. The cause of the brain injury, location, age, intellect and motivation all influence recovery.

I recently met a young man whose accident had been over 12 years ago. When he was a child he had been hit by a car. His parents said that they could still see small improvements every few weeks!

Back to me & Canberra, after 6 weeks in Canberra, out of a coma but in Post Traumatic Amnesia - PTA, I was air lifted to Epworth Hospital in Melbourne to commence rehab, I stayed there for 255 days. I cannot remember arriving at Epworth due to the PTA. Towards the very end of my time at Epworth they showed me the room where I first was, this did not bring back any memories.

My mother moved to Melbourne to be with me the whole time I was in Epworth, she rented a room a few hundred metres from the hospital.

From what I can remember my days at Epworth were always busy. I had a single room with a city view. I do remember learning how to use the wheel chair. For a few weeks they had an orderly accompanying me to make sure I was safe. After a few weeks I was given the all clear and allowed to take myself over the road to the rehab centre where I had physio, speech, psychology and occupational therapy training, it was a full day!

Downstairs at Epworth there was a Hudsons Coffee Shop, I used to go there almost every day for coffee or hot chocolate. I was amazed that more patients didn't go there, it was very rare that I saw another wheelchair there. It was a good place to meet people who came to visit me.

As I became more adventurous in my wheelchair I would go out onto Bridge Rd the main road of Richmond, as there were many coffee shops and restaurants there – the hospital food was very

good, I learnt not to be choosy but after a few months I learnt that you could order food not on the menu – I found they had smoked salmon and great pasta always available.

I clearly remember the first time I went out to dinner with the Occupational Therapy group from Epworth. We went to a local Vietnamese restaurant, a few of us in wheelchairs, others could walk. That is how different brain injuries can be, people are affected in so many diverse ways.

When you initially have an injury like this they grade you on the Glasgow Coma Scale The GCS is a way of recording conscious state through eye, verbal and motor responses.

It is graded from 3 to 15, less than 8 is severe, 9 – 12 moderate, greater than 13 minor. I was assessed at Tumbarumba as a 3.

After being in a coma there is a time called Post Traumatic Amnesia (PTA) – I entered this phase towards the end of my time at Canberra. As one emerges from a coma you often don't just "wake up" You are visually awake but appear disoriented, confused and have difficulty remembering information from day to day – in some cases no short term memory or it is very poor.

They use the time you take to come out of PTA to grade the severity of your injury. Less than 10 minutes very mild, 10 – 60 minutes mild, 1 – 24 hours moderate, 1 – 7 days severe, 1 – 4 weeks very severe, more than 4 weeks extremely severe. I was in PTA for over 2 months.

The longer the length of PTA the more likely the person will have ongoing and lasting deficits. To see if you are out of PTA they do a number of memory tests with you, see if you can remember pictures from day to day, remember your date of birth – I always got this right

for as long as I can remember anyway!, how old you are, for a long time I got this wrong, I kept saying 38 instead of 48 – I wish!!

The cost of rehab is huge. Epworth Hospital was six thousand dollars a week +, SWBIRS where I have spent a few days a week for over a year is \$700.00 / day. This includes accommodation, food, 24 hour care by an LSE (living skills educator) all therapy, reports and documentation that needs to be done.

My time in Epworth cost well over \$200,000.00 and in SWBIRS about \$110,000.00 to date.

Most of us do not have adequate insurance. It is something to really look at and be aware of what they cover and for how long. Where your insurance states “unlimited hospital cover” be aware that in most cases after 6 weeks your doctor has to justify to the fund your need to be in hospital.

I had my last day at SWBIRS two weeks ago, they now plan for me to return every 2 to 3 months for 5 days to see how I am going, they will also come out home every so often for home assessment – to check on my vacuuming and washing up!

Your whole body is controlled by electrical impulses, muscles for movement, eating, excretion, everything! A brain injury causes a dislocation of all electrical impulses. It not only affects messages between the brain and parts of the body but can also affect reflexes.

To start with I couldn't eat. Eating is a rhythmically controlled response and swallowing is a controlled reflex. To start with I was given fluids and nutrients through a naso gastric tube. Then a PEG tube directly into the stomach. I now have two belly buttons !

I pulled this out after about a week! The amount of nutrients you require is huge and you are on a very controlled diet. Having a naso gastric or PEG tube can be a very good way of achieving these requirements.

Following removal of the trachea in Canberra they allowed me to start having sustenance orally - everything was pureed, even the water was “thickened” It is probably good I can’t remember any of this!

At the beginning I had a catheter as I was comatose and unable to move. I remember wearing nappies which was followed by being taken to the toilet in a frame called a Bilby. Going to the toilet for me became a huge issue. The first time I went to the toilet by myself from my wheelchair was on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2009 so over 5 months after my accident. I could write a book about toilets! The best one I have come across was in the Park Hyatt in Melbourne – as you would expect!

Botox is widely used to help people who have had brain injuries. It forces the muscles they target to relax so they can concentrate on you working the correct muscles during physio to limit spasticity. My left leg and initially my right shoulder required Botox. My left leg has had over \$50,000 of Botox, I should have the best looking left leg in the country!

They also use plaster casts a lot to put your limb in a good position. I had casts on my left lower leg and right arm. I lost count of how many casts I had and these were the ones I can remember. They were not very comfortable to have, the ones I can remember would



be on for a few days only, sometimes they then made them into ½ casts that I would wear only at night.

I am sure that my fitness before the injury has helped me immensely, also my ability to focus on physical activity has been a bonus. I have come across many patients who hate the gym, on the other hand I really enjoy it!

The time involved with recovery is forever. As I read on a Brain injury website recently “Traumatic Brain Injury - TBI - isn’t an event you recover from it is with you for life “

Recovering from a brain injury is like a never ending Endurance Ride.

Knowledge about Brain Injuries has improved dramatically over the last 10 years or so. One of the first books I read was about a lady who had come off a horse in the 1980’s while droving and suffered a brain injury. Her treatment was very different from mine, she was sent back home after a couple of months with no follow up. This makes me appreciate how lucky I am.

I had my first ride on a horse in November 2010 with the RDA – Riding for the Disabled and the Hippotherapy in Melbourne. Chippie was a great horse, the only appaloosa I’ve ever ridden! A few weeks later I rode at home for the first time on a mare called Leigh Creek owned by Bill and Sandy Harbison, they bought her all the way from SA for me. She was great! I rode in the arena to start. I am now riding Actress an Anglo mare of ours that did her first 160km races last year. She is being perfect for me. I still can’t get on properly, I get on from a raised platform and she is so patient, doesn’t move at all and is so careful with everything she does.

A few weeks ago on the 21<sup>st</sup> May I rode in the 5km encouragement ride at Moora in Victoria. Kristie and Linda rode with me as a warm up for the 80 and 100km rides they were doing the following day. I wasn't sure how Actress would behave being away from home, she was perfect as always.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> January this year I got my driving licence reinstated. Prior to my assessment I had a number of driving lessons through a Wodonga Driving school. It is great to be able to drive – a great feeling of independence and being able to contribute with the longer trips is great.

In the paper last week I saw a quote of Professor Stephen Hawking – “Don't be disabled in spirit as well as physically” He has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a motor neurone condition which confines him to a wheelchair.

There is still a long way to go with my recovery, it will never finish.

It is an unfinished job, a work in progress.

Thank you for listening to and being a part of my story so far...