

The Sudden Shock of Stroke

Derek West

It was an ordinary morning in Lackagh and I was sitting at the computer in my study, when it happened. I felt strange and peculiar all of a sudden, and I struggled downstairs, barely able to walk. I collapsed at the bottom of the stairs, conscious that my right leg was not working. I was dazed and bewildered. After some minutes Mary appeared. I could not make sense. My speech was garbled and incoherent. The words I spoke had no logic to me, or to Mary. She stared at the helpless heap at the foot of the stairs. Then as I passed into unconsciousness she sprung into action. She quickly dismissed bundling me into the car. She didn't know what it was but she knew it was something serious. She phoned the ambulance.

'Ambulance service'.

'My husband has collapsed. He's at the bottom of the stairs'.

'Don't move him. Where are you?'

'Portnoo, Co. Donegal'.

'An ambulance is on its way from Killybegs. Where exactly are you in Portnoo?'

My wife explained and within a quarter of an hour an ambulance edged its way into the driveway.

"Where is he?" a burly lady asked.

My wife led her to her fallen man, and the lady with wondrous dexterity manipulated me into a contraption and into the ambulance in gig time. Of all of this I was oblivious.

A discussion followed between the lady and my wife, a one-sided conversation. I was going to Letterkenny Hospital. There was no way I was going to Sligo. No, my wife could not travel in the ambulance. The doors were closed and the ambulance set off for Letterkenny, almost thirty miles away.

I was unconscious through all this. What I gathered afterwards was that I arrived at Letterkenny, and received some treatment that lessened the effect of the stroke (for stroke it was) in a timely fashion and then dispatched by another ambulance to Beaumont.

Beaumont is the centre for serious strokes, so I was in the right place. My wife, meanwhile, informed by phone as to my whereabouts, set off the following day for Dublin, bearing clothes, a pair of shoes (I had none!), and as many electronic toys as littered my desk. She had no notion when she would revisit the house in Donegal.

When she reached Beaumont she was allowed deliver the clothes and the shoes, but was not allowed to see me.

It was in fact 33 days until she was allowed to see me. She visited the hospitals - St Vincent's and the Royal Hospital Donnybrook - as a kind of glorified laundry lady.

I was mouldering, sleeping a lot, with little interest outside my own hopeless state. I didn't read, watch TV, or listen to the radio.

I did answer the phone. An amazing number of friends and acquaintances who rang to enquire about my state of health. I did answer them eagerly and managed to sound upbeat most of the time. It was a lifeline.

Mary was keen for me to attend the Royal Hospital Donnybrook. She had heard such good things about it, and about Dr. Tim Cassidy, who had charge of stroke patients in both Vincent's and the Royal Hospital. On Friday 23rd May, I was transferred there. It had an immediate transformative effect. It wasn't just the spacious buildings, the rich art collection that adorned the walls and the generous, verdant grounds - though they all helped - but it was the programme of events - the Physio, the Occupational, the Speech and Language Therapist and the Medical Social Work - as well as the care of the nurses, doctors, care assistants, and the caterers. I and my fellow-patients were looked after by a team, and they knew each of us and cared for us.

I suppose things were also helped by visitors and home visits which began shortly after I arrived. They reminded us of our loved ones and of the world outside.

Loss of Language

One of the most frightening episodes of the stroke came a number of weeks into my stay at the Royal Hospital. I was walking in the grounds with Romy and Catherine, the physiotherapists, when I had a total lapse of language. I could not speak a word of sense. The words I wanted and the words I produced were two totally different things. The desired speech was buried deep inside me, beyond reach, and the words produced were a string of nonsense. And the two refused to meet. I don't know how long it lasted, maybe a day or two. I was scared that I would never speak sense again. Fortunately, I was with two physiotherapists and then a Speech and Language Therapist when I was having this attack.

They witnessed it and were alarmed by it. Reports went up the line. Eventually, it was decided that I should have an MRI scan, to determine when the damage to my speech was permanent. I am still awaiting the results of that test. In the meantime the speech has come back!

Lost in the Internet

After the attack, I completely forgot how to use a computer. I was shattered and stressed. For quite some time I did not care. Ignorance of the internet suited me just fine. But then, as my curiosity about life came back, so did my interest in the workings of the computer and, indeed, my interest in Leader magazine.

I did not know where to start; I was completely at sea. I turned to Lynn and I turned to Eva for help. They were my instructors in Occupational Therapy and Speech and Language respectively. They diverted some of their efforts to helping me with the computer. Lynn was concerned about my typing speed, especially with the right hand, which had been rendered pretty useless by the stroke. I did manage to get my typing speed up to three words a minute, with 90% accuracy. The left hand was a better prospect!

They were both enormously helpful. I was exceedingly stupid and I took a long time to learn the basic lessons. I looked at the computer as a foreign machine and I had not a clue what it was about. The buttons were as a foreign country and I did not know where to start.

When Eva helped me to reset the passwords it made all the difference, because I did not have to rely on the grey notebook which I have lost anyway in my forgetfulness. Slowly I am gaining a kind of mastery of the computer, thanks to the infinite patience of my tutors. Signs on it are the fact that I have written this article. Back in the day, in Beaumont or St. Vincent's I couldn't have done a thing.

One of the wonders of the Royal Hospital is that you can mark your progress statistically. You mark your progress because everything is noted and recorded.

In Physio, I am constantly monitored by Romy and Catherine. I may be lifting 7kg or 9kg of weights - they have it all recorded. That walk on the grass or gravel is noted. Stair - which stairs? How long? With or without a stick? My progress through the gym is one unbroken math of triumph.

The one constant failure about which I fret is the machine which measures my reactions as a driver. This consists of a bank of flashing lights; your job is to get to them, switch them off before they go off. It's all about the speed of your response. If it's not fast enough, you are not fit for the road. That's where I am right now.

The irony of this hospital is that it started as a place for the incurables in the 1700's and has ended in part as being a hospital for the curables in the 1990s.

Please note: The strict patient visitation rules mentioned in this piece were in keeping with the Royal Hospital Donnybrook's continued compliance with national guidelines and safety measures related to the Covid-19 pandemic.