

Stroke Recovery

The experience of a local author.



Funny things, strokes.

The word can be a misnomer as it was in my case. No blinding flash; no sensation of being struck down. It was the beginning of December 2006. I'd been working late on the first chapter of a new book when I decided that I'd had enough. I switched off my computer, stood up, and promptly had to sit down again because I couldn't stand. My sense of balance had gone completely.

Getting to the house from my office outbuilding was a problem. I can't remember how I made it but I do recall reaching my library and clinging to two things: a bookcase and a belief that I'd be okay after some sleep. I couldn't even sit on the bed without keeling over sideways. My wife's beliefs were more practical than mine. Christine believed in getting help. She called NHS Direct. Even though it was a Saturday, within twenty minutes I was bundled into an ambulance and spent the next six weeks in a local hospital, first in an intensive care unit, then in a high dependency ward, and finally a month in another local hospital rehabilitation unit where they taught me to go through the same process that a baby goes through when it learns to walk, starting with the supposedly simple task of sitting in bed propped up with pillows. A terrifying 20-minute ordeal by noise in a magnetic resonance imaging machine revealed that I suffered cerebral blockage in an area of my brain that controls balance. That was the bad news. The good news was that other bits of my crudded neural network could be trained to take over the work of providing me with a sense of balance so that I could learn to walk. I was supposed to receive intensive physiotherapy but a spate of staff illnesses meant that the regular NHS sessions were not forthcoming. It was no one's fault.

My decision to stroke just before Christmas was not a good one. The physiotherapists did the best they could but they were overwhelmed. Also my stroke had left me with no feeling in my right foot, it was completely numb. Have you ever tried standing or walking on a foot that's gone to sleep? It's impossible, doubly so when you've lost your sense of balance. I did manage a few steps using parallel bars but my right foot felt like a sock full of custard. I was convinced that learning to walk was out of the question.



BEVAN WILSON

Physiotherapy & Sport Injuries Clinics

James Follett, local character and author of some 25 novels, numerous radio plays and television dramas, suffered a stroke in 2006. In this piece James writes of his experiences.

After five weeks of poor progress my wife took the bold step of discharging me from hospital into her care because I was alone in a ward with no one to talk to and was sinking into a state of depression that wasn't helped by all the drugs I taking. She brought me my notes for my new novel but reading them was just too much effort, it was easier to stare at the wall. It was a brave move because I could only stray from my wheelchair by clutching a walking frame, and having a strong hand holding onto a handling belt that I wore like a parachute harness. The hospital's primary concern was my size. At six foot five inches tall and weighing about 18 stone, I was more bear than human being. The local NHS Stroke Support Team worked wonders. They fitted out our downstairs bathroom with all manner of aids for the disabled, and my son, Richard, installed a double bed in our library, much to the delight of our two black furred and black-hearted sibling rivals from hell, Dylan and Thomas, a pair of Bombay cats, who promptly garrisoned my bed as theirs.

My D-Day (Discharge Day) went according to my son's well-orchestrated plan. By midday I was back at home. There had been many black moments during my weeks in hospital when I thought I'd never see my home again. I couldn't fault the dedicated care of the hospital staff but to be in a wide bed in which I could turn over without fear of falling onto the floor, and to be able to sleep until a civilised hour in the morning was bliss. Dylan and Thomas weren't too pleased at having to share their bed in the library with me but they bore it tolerably well. Their we-shall-not-be-moved bed occupation caused my wife to worry about infection but those cats never caught anything from me. Their occasional blood-curdling spitting, growling and swearing contests under the bed alternated with all night choir practice sessions, that kept half the village awake, alarmed my wife but my daily dose of pills enabled me to sleep through anything at the drop of a girder. Getting to my office was a bit of a struggle, as was remembering how to drive my computer's email software. I was deeply touched my many emails waiting for me from readers all over the world wishing me good luck and a speedy recovery. My cousin became a supplies officer tasked with tracking down replacements for all the pieces of under-size equipment that the hospital loaned me.

My pair of NHS-loaned crutches consisted of one that was too long, and one that was too short. Even had I learned to use them, I would've been condemned to walking along only kerbs with deep gutters. Many roads in our Surrey village have paths and kerbs on one side only. I would've been condemned to going places but unable to return home.

Sunday Mass was my first trip out and an ordeal for my poor wife who had to struggle single-handed to fold my wheelchair, loaned by the British Red Cross and get it and me into the car, but at the church we were surrounded by helpful parishioners who greeted my return with overwhelming warmth. As part of my rehabilitation into the normal world my daughter, Joanna, took me on shopping trips to the supermarket. She coped admirably with me in a wheelchair and quickly learned how to hitch it to a special trolley for the disabled. My first visit was a revelation. I was used to seeing the world from my height of six foot five inches. Now I was seeing the world from a child's point of view and found myself surrounded by legs and mini-skirted thighs. I decided that being stuck in a wheelchair wasn't so bad after all but my poor daughter found the turning circle of a wheelchair coupled to a shopping trolley somewhat irksome. She took to leaving her dozing dad for short periods to go scooting off down aisles on unencumbered foraging sorties. On one occasion I woke up in a panic to discover I'd been abandoned in feminine hygiene.

Christine secured the services of a neuro physiotherapist from Bevan Wilson Physiotherapy who planned to start her treatment by visiting me twice a week at home. My initial feelings were that the whole thing would be a waste of time and money. How could I possibly learn to walk on a dead right foot that felt like a lead sock full of custard?

Then the talented JoJo Newman of Bevan Wilson Physiotherapy entered my life, shook it by the scruff of its neck and stood it on its feet. For her first visit she bought a piece of equipment for restoring sensation to my dead right foot: a tennis ball! She made me sit and practice rolling it back and forth on the floor underneath my bare right foot. JoJo doubted if every nerve in my foot was dead. To my astonishment, there was a certain point when I could feel the tennis ball against my instep. I exercised my foot and tennis ball hard for week so that by her second visit JoJo got me standing with enough confidence not to hang on anything. I still couldn't move without my frame but my foot had enough feeling for me to stand and shave at a mirror. It was sheer bliss.

After the home visits I started visiting JoJo at her treatment room at The Meath in Godalming where she had plenty of equipment designed to help end my dependency on a wheelchair. That day came sooner than I expected when she had me clinging to a handrail at the end of a corridor and announced that I was going to walk, unaided, into her treatment room. I had managed a few faltering footsteps before on parallel bars but this time it was very different. I had no frame, no crutches, no one holding onto my handling belt. The corridor had wall handrails for emergency use only and I was under strict instructions from JoJo not fall over because that would result in a morning's paperwork for her. I did it! I don't know how but I did it. With Christine urging me towards her, I walked a wobbly 20 meters or so along that corridor it felt more like 20 miles.



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I was so overcome that I burst into tears. That set off Christine, and the two of us booing got JoJo started, too. It was a wonderful, emotional moment which I thought marked the end of my physiotherapy but as far as JoJo was concerned, it was only the beginning. Over the next few sessions she had me walking backwards, sideways, picking up loads in one place, putting them down in another, going up and down stairs, pounding a treadmill and setting homework in the form of strange exercises and, being a neuro physiotherapist, she was able explain why my brain would occasionally cause me to seize up with panic attacks. Understanding a problem was the key to conquering it. On the proud day that I walked into her treatment room without a wheelchair, she undermined my smug complacency by taking me into the garden and car park and making me cope with the terrors of soft ground, uneven paths, open spaces, and wind.

Thanks to JoJo a special day arrived that I never expected to see. My loaned wheelchair was returned with my unused crutches and all the paraphernalia designed to make an invalid's life tolerable and the house was restored to normal. I now visit JoJo every few weeks for what she calls some fine-tuning of my walk. The return to normal writing is proving tougher than I expected. My concentration was severely impaired by my stroke. Working for more than a couple of hours at a time is difficult but it's improving, albeit very slowly. That I've managed to find the will and the energy to finish the book I'd just started writing when I had my stroke is due very largely to the tremendous support I've received from my family, and from many dedicated staff and physiotherapists whom I am now proud and privileged to count among my friends. Today my only aid when I go out is a walking stick. It's used only for emergencies because I've never really learned to cope with wind gusts. I now lead a fairly normal life; I'm working on another book, and enjoying every minute.

James Follett, Godalming, Surrey. 02/07/2008

What is a stroke?

A stroke occurs when the blood supply to the brain is interrupted or stopped; depriving the brain in that area of the oxygen and nutrients it requires to function. Approximately 150,000 people a year are affected by stroke. The brain is the control centre of the body, and depending where in the brain the blood supply has been stopped, will cause different symptoms in everyone. Within our team of physios at Bevan Wilson, we have specialist neurological physiotherapists who can assess and treat many of the different problems a patient may have following a stroke. Patients can often be helped well beyond the initial acute phase following the stroke.

If you would like to find out more about how you or a relative can be helped please contact our practice to find out more.