

Story Number 3

Apart from having my tonsils out at 5 years old I'd never been in hospital. Even had a homebirth when my son was born.

So my 2 months in Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in 1998 aged 48 were quite out of the ordinary for me and my family. Half this time was in Intensive Care on a ventilator, unable to speak or move.

It started like this. On Monday I worked late; on Tuesday night I limped into the Emergency Department on the arm of a kind neighbour who had dropped by my home to check on me. I remember collapsing on a trolley and was seen virtually immediately.

For the first few weeks after that I remember only bits; my mother appearing from NSW, my son from USA. In addition to the severe community-acquired pneumonia that led to my admission, I developed sepsis, respiratory failure (ARDS) and became paralysed with critical care myopathy, which made it difficult for me to be "weaned off" the ventilator.

After transfer to the respiratory ward's fairly new "high dependency unit" and intensive efforts of physios and nurses I was eventually able to breathe on my own, stand up and take a few steps. In time I stopped being fed through a tube through my nose to my stomach and the intravenous antibiotics were stopped too. I became free of almost all the tubing! Going home was a tremendously exciting time, even if I needed home oxygen at first. My lungs were permanently scarred from the severe infection.

I was referred to the HomeWard Bound program where a physio came to visit at home and advise on further rehabilitation exercises, and later I attended the Pulmonary Rehabilitation Program in the Physiotherapy Department. Despite continuing lung and muscle problems I returned to work 4 months after this illness episode began, only a few hours a day at first, building up to 25 hours a week, so I could maintain involvement in rehabilitation classes and keep a better work-life balance than before I became sick.

Hospital staff have told me that I am one of the few who have survived such severe illness - I've since read research saying that at least 50% die of ARDS, for example. On my first outpatient visit after discharge the specialist told me that a lung transplant may soon become necessary - though it's definitely not on the cards now, more than 9 years later.

I have few complaints about the care or medical advice I received, but feel eternally grateful for the many Charlie's staff who helped me through this incredible health journey.

I think I must be a real Charlie's success story. I have become a regular walker and a proponent of self-management, social value of exercise and self help groups.

I've since retired from work to become a more active health consumer representative. Every 26 August anniversary of my admission I take time to remember the kindness of neighbours and the skill of medical, nursing and physio staff who have helped me to be a positive and active survivor, now almost 10 years later.

I'd like to read my 1998 nursing notes and find a way of using my ICU experience to help staff who care for people in a coma. We are aware of much more than people think and the drug-induced dreams can be very scary - as you don't always realise they are dreams.