

MAGAZINE

OF MY HEAD

Reporter Michelle Sutton writes about how her "life-changing" overseas trip to London became the fight of her life after a motorbike crash left her with serious head injuries.

I can't remember the exact details around how I ended up with a head injury in Charing Cross Hospital. I don't remember hopping on the back of a guy's motorbike without a helmet, or how he lost control, sending me somersaulting 20m in the air and hitting the pavement so hard that the left side of my body was grated along the concrete like a carrot having its skin peeled. Neither do I recall hitting my head, which stopped my body sliding along the brutal, bone-crunching concrete.

Ever since the July 4 accident, I have had to rely on what I am told by medical staff. First on the accident scene were the Helicopter Emergency Medical Services team members, who attend the four most serious of London's 4000 emergency calls each day. They were shocked but thrilled to see me still alive when I returned to thank them for their help nine weeks later.

I wouldn't have recovered if they hadn't been on hand to allow oxygen to reach my brain and reduce the swelling in the crucial first hour. When the team of a doctor and paramedics arrived and found me lying in a central London street, they inserted a respiratory tube to open up my airways. This crew has 10% funding from Virgin's Richard Branson and must raise the remaining 90% of their running costs.

I do remember life before the accident. It was great. I had been working as a public-relations executive for about 17 months at the Institution of Mechanical Engineers in London. The institution had applied to sponsor me so I could stay on past my two-year working holiday visa and continue

working after I returned from a tour of Europe with my flatmates.

Living in London was something I had dreamt about for years and something I had spent months saving for. I was positive the trip would be the making of me and improve my future. Instead, I was taken to the critical care unit in Charing



The author with the emergency team who saved her: Dr Scott Farmer and paramedic Nick Gray, left.

Cross Hospital where I spent more than two months.

I was a 26-year-old girl in an infant's body whose former life had been snatched away from her. Upon arrival at hospital, doctors stitched up a 4cm gaping hole above my left eye and a 2cm gash above my lip.

The crash had left the entire left-hand side of my body battered, my skin ripped and tattered and my front teeth broken off.

Thankfully, my brain wasn't swollen enough to warrant removing part of my skull, which is fairly common, to relieve the pressure.



The author is visited by a friend at Charing Cross Hospital shortly after the accident.

My parents, Warren and Pauline Sutton, who live in Taranaki, were told by doctors to fly over as soon as possible. They arrived after a 28-hour flight two days after receiving the call, unsure of what or who they would be faced with.

It took me five days to wake from an induced coma and five weeks to get my memory back. From then on, my entire focus was to get back home to Taranaki and to regain some normality.

The brain is at the centre of all my rehabilitation and recovery, but how it heals has still to be fully understood. Medical staff

The reawakening of my brain was played out in front of all, while I experienced Post Traumatic Amnesia (PTA), which is common for most head-injury sufferers.

PTA transformed me into a paranoid and aggressive psychotic. I was convinced that someone was trying to blow up the hospital. My sole thought was that I had to escape or I would die.

I knew I wasn't thinking straight and that I had to keep my thoughts to myself, but I was still insistent on trying to escape out of a fire exit, sneaking out, or physically battling past nurses to do so.

I was so panicked that my mother and boyfriend, Jason Cargo, had to be called to calm me down because the nurses feared I would hurt myself while trying to escape.

I vividly remember looking at a window close to my bed and trying to figure out how I could smash through it and scale down the hospital wall before a nurse realised. I became obsessed with the idea and I remember struggling with a nurse to put my shoes on because they would help me run faster, so I could escape easier.

It took me five weeks to move on from that stage.

One day, I simply snapped out of it. From then on, I improved dramatically. Nurses and doctors have since said I am extremely lucky. My occupational therapist later told me she knew I would be OK because my "personality always shone through".

My determination was evident right from the start when I ripped out a breathing tube and my catheter, refusing assistance from anything foreign to me.

Medical experts are unsure why I recovered when many do not. In the United Kingdom, about half of all deaths of people under the age of 40 are due to a traumatic brain injury. And every year in New Zealand, 10,000 people are admitted to

hospitals with serious brain injuries. Men are two to three times more likely to suffer a head injury than women.

Headway, a head-injury representative group, is campaigning for the compulsory use of helmets to be worn by quad bikers in the UK after two recent fatal accidents there.

My short-term memory returned five weeks after I had extensively shaken up my brain, but I have never remembered the accident or any of the pain I must have experienced.

I have since found out the driver of the motorbike has been charged by police for drink-driving.

I have yet to have any contact with the guy, who I met the day of my accident. I know he suffered a broken jaw in the crash, but I have not heard of any other injuries he sustained. He never visited me.

As I battled through my treatment, I was visited by endless friends who were still going about their daily lives in London.

Having a normal life was something I could only imagine as my greatest problems became learning to write again or being woken at 6am by a nurse to read my blood pressure.

By this stage, my father had no choice but to return to New Zealand to run Clever Kids, an education business he co-owns with my mother. At the time, returning home for me seemed like an unreachable dream. But after 10 weeks in hospital and considerable improvement in cognitive-focused therapy, I was discharged and cleared to fly.

I had put all my effort into my rehabilitation believing it would get me back home and it did.

I am still unsure why I decided to hop on the back of that motorbike and it is unlikely I will ever remember, but it appears that I was right about travelling to London. It was a life-changing trip for me - perhaps more than I ever thought possible.

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