

Chris's Story

Five years ago this Christmas my younger brother Chris, then 19 years old, suffered a serious head injury as a result of a road traffic accident - he was a backseat passenger. Two of our friends were also in the car, however, Chris was the most seriously injured. He was resuscitated at the scene of the accident and again, upon arrival in hospital where his injuries were deemed to be fatal. He was given very little chance of survival and subsequently went on to spend five weeks in a coma.

In the beginning my family and I took things day by day, getting over each hurdle as it came along. Firstly, would he live? Secondly, would he talk again? Thirdly, would he walk again? And so on and so on... Against every medical prognosis we were given, Chris survived and emerged from his coma. After a period of rehabilitation in hospital he returned home three months after the accident.

During this time the doctors and therapists had told us to be prepared for dealing with a brain damaged family member. They warned us that it would be harder than we would imagine. However we were so thankful that Chris was still with us that I don't think we fully comprehended what lay ahead.

In the early days the effects of the brain damage were clearly visible. Chris was facially and bodily scarred by the accident. His speech was slow and slurred. His walking was dramatically affected by ataxia. He had double vision and his hand-eye co-ordination was very much impaired. However within the first six months to a year after the accident we saw marked improvements in Chris's abilities. His walking became more stable, his speech became more controlled and he generally became more co-ordinated. All of this was of course very encouraging.

Around a year after the accident the improvements became less obvious - we knew that the most pronounced recovery from a brain injury happened in the months immediately after the impact and that subsequent to that, improvements would be less dramatic.

It was around this time that the true nature of brain damage made itself known to us. It was easy to latch onto the physical aspects of the injury in the beginning as these were the most conspicuous; however I believe it is the more subtle aspects of a head injury that are the most difficult to come to terms with, especially for family members.

Chris had always been an extremely sharp, intelligent and witty person. He was a very funny guy and was famous amongst our friends and family for his capers. Whilst his sense of humour was still intact after the accident, he was not nearly as quick witted as before. In addition he was less adept at social interaction - he would interrupt people in conversation repeatedly and not realise that it was in any way rude. He would also on occasion say inappropriate things when out in public, sometimes causing offence or embarrassment. My parents and I found this quite hard to handle and would sometimes chastise Chris, however, this would tend to make him react aggressively as he didn't understand what he was doing wrong. In fact his temper had become very short and he would fly off the handle easily, often directing his anger at our parents.

As a fully functioning adult you take for granted all of the ways in which a healthy brain enables you to interact with those around you and lead a fulfilling life. It is only when someone close to you loses such capabilities that you begin to realise how complex the workings of your brain are and how integral they are to you as a person. In this way one of the most intriguing effects of the damage to Chris's brain was the impact it had on his emotions. Nothing seemed to move Chris emotionally any more. For example when one of the family dogs died shortly after the accident Chris was totally un-phased by it. For someone who adored animals and in the past had been known to really mourn the loss of our family pets this was extremely out of character. In addition Chris claimed that he didn't feel 'love' for anyone any more. He said that he knew that he should, and indeed did love our parents but the actual feeling of love had gone. Similarly when watching a sad, frightening or happy film, Chris would not react emotionally at all. He seemed to have lost the ability to empathise with people and experience human emotion. The only true emotional reactions he seemed to have were those of anger or frustration. Thankfully his sense of humour hadn't left him so he was able to recognise this inability to feel emotion and was sanguine about it.

One of the other most striking results of the brain damage that Chris sustained was the effect on his memory. If you were to ask him how his day had been, who he'd seen and what had been said to him he would often not be able to recall anything. In the beginning I found this very frustrating, I couldn't imagine that you would simply forget these things and I would pester him to try and remember! But the part of Chris's brain responsible for storing this kind of information was damaged. It wasn't only his recall memory that was impaired though – he would also forget to carry out daily tasks. For example he knew that he had to do certain exercises to aid his recovery but he would simply forget to do them. To his credit he used his initiative and began to set reminders on his mobile phone to go off at certain points during the day to prompt him. He continues to this day to use his phone as a memory aid and it's proved a real life saver for him.

It soon became clear that Chris's disabilities were going to make it difficult for him to lead as fulfilling a life as other men his age. He was an avid rugby player, competing at county level, however, his injuries meant that he would never be able to play again. While I would go off skiing and snowboarding every year Chris would never be able to consider such activities, primarily because he is no longer physically co-ordinated enough but also because of the risk it entails.

One of the things I find most difficult to deal with, and I think I speak for my parents here too, is that Chris can barely read and write any more. Before the accident Chris was a very skilled artist and designer with A Levels in both disciplines; he was reading Industrial Design & Technology at university and had already set up his own business. His double vision now is such that he has to squint to read anything and his fine motor skills are such that writing, let alone drawing or designing, is too cumbersome for him. His handwriting is more similar to that of a small child than an adult. For someone who was so advanced at everything he put his mind to this is upsetting to see.

With his reading and writing skills as they are, it is hard to see what employment opportunities there will be for Chris. Computer work is no better as his double vision

means that he can't look at a monitor for more than a few minutes at a time. Physically he is too impaired to take on manual labour type work. In addition he suffers very badly from fatigue. This is a very common side effect of brain damage and one of the most debilitating – it is also I think the least understood as people will often interpret it as laziness.

However Chris is not intimidated by any of this and still manages to lead a very active and rewarding life. He currently attends Rehab UK in Birmingham three days a week where he builds on the skills that have been affected by his injuries. He has a girlfriend and a varied social life. He goes to the gym regularly to stay in good physical shape and to continue to improve his motor skills and co-ordination. Despite not being able to play any more he remains passionate about rugby and is a keen follower of the music scene.

As a family it is not often that we focus on the negatives. We know that we are extremely lucky to still have Chris with us, and even luckier to have him in such a fit state given the injuries he sustained. This I know is down to Chris's fortitude and determination in the face of his disabilities, coupled with a lot of support and stimulation from his family and friends. Coming to terms with the brain damage of a loved one is a daunting prospect which requires you to look beyond physical infirmity to the enigmatic workings of the brain and how much it is responsible for making a person who they are.

I have nothing but respect for Chris who never gets wistful or indulgent over what's happened to him. Despite being impaired in many ways that his peers will never understand he approaches life with enthusiasm and is confident of what he can and will achieve. I am proud to say that he is my brother.