

A head injury can be traumatic – but for the injured and their family



The brain – the driving force behind activities that many of us take for granted – is resilient, but there are times when our vulnerability is

exposed. Traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) occur when there has been a violent blow or jolt to the head. The brain is launched into a collision course with the inside of the skull, resulting in possible bruising of the brain, tearing of nerve fibres and bleeding.

This is the situation facing 29-year-old Richard (Rich) Holland, a young man with his whole life before him, who now finds himself locked within his own body. His is a remarkable story of determination and courage – a reminder of why we should never give up.

RICH'S STORY

Born on 30 November 1982, Rich Holland was destined for greatness, driven by his passion and dedication for sport and the outdoors. Aged 25, he made the decision to move to Dubai, while the rest of his family – his mother Judy, stepfather Colin, brother Daniel and sister Pippa – were in Australia. On 11 October 2012, Rich set out on his bike, wanting to get in a good training session for an upcoming triathlon. What started as any other day for the ironman turned into a bike ride that would not only change his own life, but that of his family and friends, forever.

Rich was pedantic about safety – he wore the best safety gear and had lights on his bike. Despite taking all the necessary precautions, he was hit by a car from behind, sustaining multiple life-threatening injuries. He had broken ribs, punctured lungs, a fractured sternum and a fractured right fibula. But the most concerning were the brain injuries he sustained, the most severe of which was a contusion on his brain stem.

While he has recovered 100% cognitive function, due to his injuries his brain is unable to send motor messages to his body. He knows exactly what is going on, but as his brain no longer communicates with his body, he cannot move at all – he is locked inside his own body. Only time, patience and intensive neuro-rehab, physiotherapy, occupational and speech therapy will reveal whether Rich can find a way out of his bodily prison.

JUDY'S STORY

"Rich has shown such determination, courage and, above all, grace in his recovery," says Rich's mom. It's a year after the accident, and Judy recalls her initial reaction when she heard the news that her son was in a critical condition in Rashid Hospital in Dubai. "I flew to Dubai at 6 the next morning. The flight was going to take 12 hours; it was agonising to be so helpless and out of communication. I was terrified of what I was facing on my arrival at the other side," Judy explains. "I was openly praying loudly for help."

On her arrival at the hospital, Judy was informed that Rich's condition was critical; the ICU doctor told her that only 3% of patients with this kind of brain injury pull through – and he did. Rich spent the next three months in hospital, but he was in the country on a work visa. When it became clear that he would not be returning to work, the decision was made to get Rich back to South Africa to start the intensive rehabilitation he required. "We realised that this was going to be a very long and difficult road to recovery for Rich. We needed all the emotional and physical help from family and good friends to get us through this," Judy says. And that support was home, in South Africa.

Dealing with TBI can be extremely gruelling and emotionally draining. Judy explains that it was a day-to-day survival for them all. Their family motto became "another day, another blessing".

Judy shares: "I don't want to kid myself into thinking that the hardest challenges are now behind us, as there are some very scary, very real consequences of brain injury, and acceptance is an important part of the process of moving on." She adds that the magnitude of all of the competing demands is more overwhelming than she even has words for. "I am left feeling broken, as if I have been beaten myself."

What makes the situation even more challenging is the fact that Rich has 100% cognitive brain function. He thinks, he dreams, he loves, he hurts, he feels – but he cannot move. This has left him extremely frustrated and angry. "He is not the man he wants to be at present. He cannot do the things that once came so very naturally to him, and his motivation and self-esteem have to be reborn from something new."

Judy feels that very few people would be up to fighting this never-ending, strenuous battle, but Rich is determined that, with the help of his friends, family and therapists, he will recover. He has exceeded every expectation for his recovery and is currently having up to four rehabilitative sessions each day, which is a task in itself. "This has left us with no doubt that, in another year, we will be even further stunned by his progress."

She says: "I realise now how foreign happiness and freedom feel, but now the collective blood, sweat and tears have earned us the gift of perspective. Sometimes a catastrophic event provides us with the blank slate we need to make changes in our lives, the type we might have been scared to pursue otherwise. The biggest obstacle we are likely to face in this sort of pursuit is ourselves."

"RICH IS MY HERO. HE IS EXTREMELY MODEST AND WOULD NEVER ADMIT THAT HE IS AN INSPIRATION"

– JUDY ROTHSCHILD, RICH'S MOTHER.

“THE BIGGEST OBSTACLE WE ARE LIKELY TO FACE IN THIS SORT OF PURSUIT IS OURSELVES”

– JUDY ROTHSCHILD, RICH’S MOTHER.



THE
NEUROLOGIST’S
PERSPECTIVE

THE
PSYCHOLOGIST’S
PERSPECTIVE

Dr Ed Baalbergen, a neurologist at the Life Vincent Pallotti Rehabilitation Unit in Pinelands, first met Rich four months after the accident in Dubai. “He was unable to talk, with a tracheotomy in place and a feeding tube in his stomach. He appeared to understand simple commands and conversation, which he acknowledged with gestures such as eye-blinking and smiling,” Baalbergen says. Although he was not fully “locked in”, which only allows movement of the eyes, Rich certainly had a partial locked-in syndrome.

“Unfortunately, with any TBI, the ultimate prognosis is uncertain, and the road to recovery is a long and arduous one, with no guarantee of a positive outcome,” he explains. Those who have experienced a TBI are often permanently incapacitated to some degree, whether it’s physically or cognitively. “Recovery is a long-term commitment to physical therapy, and improvement is slow.”

Baalbergen believes the family supporting its loved one needs all the support and backing it can get, as the rehabilitation process is long and extremely taxing. The financial stress is also a major sore point. Medical aids in South Africa will cover only the acute care, which is in hospital, and rehab is covered only for an undefined period of time, which Baalbergen explains is normally about eight weeks, after which the family is on its own financially. “The road is a long and emotionally and financially difficult one; I would advise families to seek help, be it financially or otherwise, from wherever they are able to,” Baalbergen says.

Michelle Andrews, a Johannesburg clinical psychologist, explains that TBI manifests differently in individuals; no injury, victim or family that is affected by TBI is alike. And TBI can pose significant challenges for the injured individual and those involved in his or her life after the accident.

The alterations of roles played by family members, and the consequent changes in relationship dynamics following TBI, can result in a wide range of emotional experiences. Whether as a direct result of the site of the brain injury or as a consequence of his or her struggle post-injury, the individual with TBI often feels, to family and friends, unlike the person once known to them. Family members are faced with the difficulty of adapting to their loved one, who may have changed in many ways. The various changes in the injured individual’s functioning and way of being are often fully comprehended only over time. Recovery and change are a lifelong process for both the injured individual and his/her family following TBI.

In the months following the injury, much of the focus is directed towards the rehabilitation and recovery of the individual. During this time, the needs and recovery process of family members are often compromised. It is essential for families affected by TBI to seek professional support. The importance of family functioning is emphasised by research, which suggests that a family’s ability to cope with the consequences of TBI has a significant influence on the injured individual’s recovery process.

The degree and nature of impact experienced by those in the injured individual’s support system are coloured largely by their relationship to the individual with TBI. A sister’s experience of her brother post-TBI, and her difficulties relating to this, will differ considerably from a father’s experience of his son post-injury. The uniqueness of each relative’s process of coming to terms with the consequences of TBI needs to be respected and supported.



2X

MEN ARE MORE THAN TWICE AS LIKELY THAN WOMEN TO SUSTAIN A TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY

BACK ON YOUR BIKE: IN SUPPORT OF RICH HOLLAND

The Back on Your Bike Fund has been set up to raise money in support of Rich’s road to recovery, which is still an ongoing struggle for his family, both financially and emotionally. All donations to the fund will be put towards his medical care, extensive rehabilitation, medical equipment and future medical expenses.

For more information or to follow Rich’s story and progress: Visit www.backonyourbike.com. Follow @backonyourbike on Twitter. Like the “Back on Your Bike” Facebook page.

1.7

MILLION

THE NUMBER OF TBIS THAT OCCUR ON A YEARLY BASIS IN THE UNITED STATES

WHERE TO GET SUPPORT – HEADWAY GAUTENG

Headway Gauteng is a support group for families affected by brain injury. All of its injured members led a full life until they sustained a life-changing brain injury, which could include permanent changes to physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes.

It is recognised as a training institution by both the Occupational and Speech Therapy Departments at Wits University, and the Psychology Departments of the University of Johannesburg and Unisa, which use Headway as a practical site for their students.

It provides the following services:

- A family support group consisting of hundreds of families from a diverse range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The families all have someone dear to them who has sustained a brain injury.
- A counselling service and a small telephone call centre which provides one-on-one counselling to families.
- A friendship group, which meets twice a month.
- A holistic, fully inclusive activity/therapy day programme, which provides injured members with a structured, productive day where stimulating and enjoyable activities and social skills can be practised, under the supervision of fully trained therapists, ably assisted by a team of volunteers from the community. Visit www.headway-gauteng.org for more information.

LOCKED IN YOUR OWN MIND

Dr Stephen Hawking, who suffers from ALS (also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease), has been paralysed for decades, yet it hasn’t stopped his research, and he is acknowledged as one of the world’s top scientists. He, too, is described as having a version of locked-in syndrome.

Every year, since 1997, Intel has provided him with a custom-made computer that helps him to communicate with the world. When Hawking turned 71 in January, the company announced that it is developing a system that will give him the ability to communicate faster, even as his condition progresses. He is able to control the computer through cheek movements, which trigger an infrared switch, attached to his glasses, that allows him to select characters of individual words on a screen in front of him, creating a word a letter at a time. Once his sentence is constructed (around a word a minute), a digital voice synthesiser can speak for him.

However, Intel is now looking at ways to interact with the computer, using speech, eye-tracking, gestures and facial expression, to create a more efficient system that can increase language composition speed up to 10 times its current pace. Hopefully, further research will allow people like Rich to express themselves, despite their physical limitations.