

My name is Karen Herrmann. I live in the Sutherland Shire in Sydney. Ever since High School I've been an average height, slim 50kg competitive athlete, except during my 4 pregnancies. In August 2015, when I was 47 years old, on a Friday afternoon whilst energetically cleaning the outdoor spa, I began to feel pain in my chest. It gradually worsened over half an hour until left arm pain also began. I suddenly felt hot & nauseous. My first reaction was to head to the phone to call someone (or an ambulance) for help. However, when I picked up the handset it was dead as there was an extremely rare Shire wide electricity blackout most of that day. My mobile only had 2% charge so I sent a text my eldest daughter Amy, a physiotherapist asking her what my symptoms might be. I knew they were heart attack or stroke symptoms but was in denial that could happen to a young fit person. I was hoping she would tell me I'd just strained something & to take it easy. Unfortunately, she didn't receive my message until 2 hours later when she finished her shift and I'd been deliriously resting on the lounge. She headed straight to me whilst in the meantime my 2nd eldest daughter Bree arrived home and sat close by as she knew it wasn't normal for me to nap on the lounge.

Amy suggested immediately it was a heart attack & prepared to take me to hospital. I was still in denial as she pointed out that elite athletes drop dead of heart attacks. Strangely, once I stood up from the lounge the pain all disappeared and I felt fine. Amy was heading away for the weekend so I told her to go and promised that if my pain returned I would call the doctor.

Later that evening the chest & left arm pain returned whilst I was hanging washing on the clothes airer inside. My husband was now home and insisted on taking me straight to hospital as he was concerned I hadn't gone earlier when it first happened.

The ED staff & cardiologist at Sutherland hospital were fantastic & very efficient. I was given an angiogram as soon as possible and SCAD was diagnosed. A stent was not inserted as the cardiologist was concerned that due to the tear being at the distal end of the LAD artery, the upper end of the artery could be damaged during such a procedure. Instead, I had total bedrest in hospital for 5 days and further rest at home for a few weeks to enable the artery to heal. The cardiologist hoped at the time that 6 months later it would look like I'd never had a heart attack. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. I have sustained damage to the heart and probably have to stay on blood thinners & other medications long term.

So, within a few months I went from being a medication free Australian Masters Athletics 800m champion to a medication dependant heart attack survivor. I still train with my 12-year-old daughter Cloe as I've always coached her, but I can no longer compete myself. It's a small price to pay for being able to be here and watch my 4 beautiful children grow up. I recently had the wonderful experience of being 'mother of the bride' to Amy and this year sees Bree complete University, my son Jarrod start and Cloe start High School.

The whole experience certainly taught me a lot about a condition I never knew existed and I try to inform as many as I can to be aware. In the meantime, I appreciate life more and try to spend more time relaxing as I used to be a bit too busy. It's taught me that life certainly is precious.