

At the time of my SCAD at the age of 49 I was in the best physical shape I had been in for years. Most weekday mornings I began the day with a gym class, alternating weights with spin classes. Sugar had been given up 2 years before and in the last 12 months I had been fully embracing a healthy diet of no processed food. Work had been stressful for a number of years and I had been studying on top of an almost full-time job. Things were looking more positive though as I finished my study and started a new dream job in March 2016.

A few weeks prior to starting my new job I came down with a strep infection that I thought just would not give up. After a couple of weeks of antibiotics my blood test came back clear but I still didn't feel quite right. I was more tired than usual and I was getting dizzy at the gym. I went back to my GP and then another GP but it seemed like it was just taking a while to get over the virus. A test of my blood pressure between sitting and standing showed a difference of 28 points but still no answers.

In May we decided to book a cruise to celebrate my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. My thoughts at the time were 'If I have to turn 50 I'm doing it laying by a pool with a book in one hand and a cocktail in the other'. How differently I think now. I was still not feeling right when exercising but was frustrated with not getting answers and decided I was just going to push through it. I remember on the Thursday before my SCAD I increased my weights in my P9 class.

On Saturday June 25<sup>th</sup> 2016 I woke a bit tired as I hadn't slept that well the night before but got up and we went and watched my son's soccer game. Afterwards my husband and I went to do our normal grocery shop. In the car I yawned, felt really tired and had an ache across my back between my shoulders. I put it down to the heavier weights 2 days before. It went away and we did the shopping without incident and came home. I was standing in the kitchen putting away groceries when I just didn't feel right. I turned to talk to my husband but my knees went and there was a grey tunnel closing in. According to Steve my knees buckled and then I just hit the floor backwards.

We are not sure how long I was unconscious. My heart had stopped and I had stopped breathing, causing a hypoxic seizure. Steve thought I was gone. Luckily, I woke up on the floor feeling very dazed and confused. The wait for the ambulance felt like forever but, was only 20 minutes. One ridiculous thing that sticks in my mind was noticing the amount of dog hair under the sofas.

The paramedics were initially unsure why I had collapsed. As a relatively young, very fit woman with no risk factors a heart attack seemed unlikely. However as soon as the ECG showed inverted T waves he popped an Aspirin under my tongue. Similarly, at the LGH they were unsure of what had happened until my troponin came back extremely high. The cardiologist on call was debating whether to perform an angiogram that night or wait until Monday. I think I was still in denial as I remember arguing that I had to go to work on Monday. There were very strange looks from the doctors and my husband when I said that. I still remember being asked to rate the pain and getting frustrated because I didn't have pain, just a bit of nausea.

The young cardiologist was trying to contact the senior consultant but his phone was off. In the end he contacted another doctor and at 9pm I was wheeled into the Cath lab for an angiogram. Once again, I had been lucky that it was a distal LAD and too small to stent.

Three more days spent in the cardiac unit with 3 other patients, all much older and more typical cardiac cases. Due to the seizure there were also MRI and EEG tests to do. I was discharged on the following Tuesday and still really confused as to what had happened. The senior cardiologist was not known for good patient communication skills. I left hospital with a bag of medication, instructions not to drive until I had seen the neurologist and a medical certificate for one week.

Fortunately, I was able to see my GP later in the week and he was very supportive. He advised me that I could see another cardiologist and gave me a referral. He also provided another week off work. In hindsight I was silly to go back to fulltime work after only 2 weeks but seeing as it was a new job I was concerned I may be put off. My GP also arranged an appointment for a care plan and private cardiac rehab. My new cardiologist was very patient and for the first time talked about SCAD.

When I left hospital I was given Metoprolol, Tricagrelor, Aspirin, and recommended a statin. I was already taking Perindopril due to kidney issues. There were a few robust conversations with my doctors over my refusal to take the statin but as I did not have a cholesterol issue I could not see the point. I am very grateful to the SCAD support group for the link to the research advising they are not good for us. My body did not take well to the Metoprolol and I gained around 7 kg.

One of the most difficult aspects of this time was the driving ban imposed by the neurologist. As there had been a seizure I was unable to drive for 6 months. This created all sorts of issues at work as my job was an outreach one. Although management were supportive it did create pressure within the team. For 6 months I was reliant on taxi vouchers and limited in the distance I could travel. At home I was completely dependent upon my husband as there is no public transport where we live. For someone who has always been fiercely independent, the psychological impact of this was very hard to cope with.

In October I went for an Echo Cardiogram and was very happy to find out that the artery had healed. I was able to stop the blood thinners straight away. With input from my cardiologist, my GP and I came to an arrangement about the beta blockers – as long as I wear a heart rate monitor I could trial coming off them. My Fitbit is my new best friend and I feel so much better. Now I still take the Aspirin and Perindopril and will for the rest of my life.

One of the most useful parts of my recovery has been my rehabilitation plan and seeing an exercise physiologist. He started me with very gentle exercise and has explained clearly what I can and cannot do. I am now back at the gym 5 mornings a week, just in a modified way. I have my own plan for core exercises, use light weights and keep my heart rate under 130bpm.

The hardest part has been the psychological adjustment. Early on I felt a lot of 'why me?' but then again 'why not'. I have always hated limits and in the past used them as a challenge to overcome. It was difficult adjusting to what I could and couldn't do. There have been a few scary moments when I have wondered if it is happening again and 2 more trips to the LGH. Sometimes it feels like I am walking around with a ticking time bomb inside my chest. Mostly I am grateful that I am still here with my amazing husband and 2 beautiful children. We did go on my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday cruise, only now it was more of a celebration that I have turned 50. Yes, there was no diving but there was some snorkelling in some stunningly beautiful reefs. There were no cocktails but a lovely glass of bubbles on the day and time to reflect on a scary 8 months and on how lucky I am to be here with my family and friends.