



Graham and Bronwyn – Parkinson’s disease

Graham’s diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease at age 47 was shocking enough for him and his wife Bronwyn. Then the disease took their lives in a direction that neither of them could have imagined.

Graham had been a Career Army Officer and a platoon commander in 1969 in Vietnam, where it is likely he came in contact with Agent Orange. For his wife Bronwyn, who also served in the army (as a Registered Nurse) it isn’t a possibility that the exposure did not contribute to his disease.

“Graham was undoubtedly Agent Oranged to hell. We would imagine that it has had a significant impact upon him which ultimately resulted in his being diagnosed with Parkinson’s.

“I’m sure there is a correlation between the two.”

Graham was working as a security officer at a hotel when he realised something was amiss.

“I was taking my daughter to Townsville for uni and I was reaching across in the car to undo the lock and my hand started to shake. It caused me some concern.

“I eventually went to the doctor and was diagnosed. It wasn’t very good. Not very good at all.

“I had to give up my job of course because I couldn’t do CPR or things like that.”

After Graham’s diagnosis, as is standard practice, he was prescribed medication to manage his symptoms. However for Graham the medication had a rare side effect – he began to gamble compulsively.

Bronwyn recalls the shock of finding out that Graham had been secretly accessing their savings.

“I found out in 2002. We’d had a specific amount of money in an account that we had just put in to earn money and never looked at it. Unbeknown to the rest of the family Graham had been taking it out, and taking it out and taking it out.

“Now he had never in his life been one to do these things. And since having the deep brain stimulation surgery he’s never done it again either, which goes to show that it is most definitely relative to the medication.

“The neurologists we went to never mentioned the possible side-effects associated with certain medication. However, when you get onto the computer and start looking, I found that information was readily available through various USA universities such as Duke University, North Carolina. I can tell you that it was clearly known. When we finally saw Professor Peter Silburn, we were very impressed that he was certainly aware of this. The side effects of a number of medications are significant, and patients should always be advised of the possible consequences. It might only happen to a certain percentage of people but it does certainly happen.”

Bronwyn defied the advice of many people to leave Graham over the gambling.

“Just about every man and his dog was telling me to leave my husband – I don’t think you can do that.

“I was diagnosed with cancer in December 2000. I had a grade 4, 5 cm breast tumour. I had three months of chemo before they would even do the radical mastectomy and then I had months of both chemo and radiotherapy after that. Graham was so supportive of me – and it’s a two-way street isn’t it?

“My attitude is that if we are going to stay together – which we certainly are – we will be supportive of each other no matter what. For better or worse.”

When Graham and Bronwyn heard about deep brain stimulation they jumped at the chance. Graham explains:

“We heard about deep brain stimulation and after I spoke to the neurologist Professor Peter Silburn, I decided straight away to have the operation. It really wasn’t a choice – you either do it or you suffer.

“The surgery wasn’t too bad. I didn’t enjoy it of course – who does? But I knew what was ahead of me so I accepted it. I was young enough to be strong enough to handle the surgery, which helped.”

Bronwyn believes that people with Parkinson’s are on very large amounts of medication, which the Federal government subsidises at significant cost.

“I was aware that the state governments were not providing this surgery either so you have to be privately insured or DVA to be able to have such a thing and I find that to be incredible, given that the Government keeps on paying for the medication. In addition, a significant number of people with Parkinson’s end up going into aged care, which also costs the government a considerable amount.

“We worked out roughly that it was probably about a year’s worth of medication to pay for the surgery.”

Since the surgery in June 2005 Graham has been a new man.

“Virtually before I left hospital, two weeks from the first operation, I had some idea that it was working. I was grinning so that was a good sign!

“It’s a completely new life. Physically I can do almost anything now. It’s better than I imagined. I don’t take any of those medications whatsoever.”

Bronwyn is equally as enthusiastic about the results.

“It has been amazing. Out of this world. Ever since the day he got home he has his facial expression back, he’s humorous, he’s just cheeky!

“He is just totally, totally different and we’re all so excited to have him back again.”

The views expressed in this story are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect views held by Medtronic.