



Sean - Complex regional pain syndrome

Originally from Ireland, Sean had been working as a merchant seaman for almost forty years when a simple accident not only ended his career, but left him in excruciating pain.

“It was the day before the 2003 Melbourne Cup. I was unlash cargo on the ship in Burnie, Tasmania when I slipped on the deck. I put my hand out to save myself – but I fell on it and it just crunched. That was the start of my troubles.”

Sean had badly damaged his shoulder and wrist but, as the accident happened on a Tasmanian public holiday, the local hospital had limited staff. In fact, Sean didn’t get to see a doctor before his ship set sail for Melbourne early the next morning. They arrived in Melbourne the same day – Cup Day, another public holiday – and so it was days after the accident before Sean finally received treatment.

“It was a couple of days before I finally got to see the company doctor. Straight away they X-rayed me and booked me in for surgery.”

It was to be the first in a long series of operations.

“I had my shoulder done, and while that was coming good I had to go into hospital and have my wrist done. After they’d done my wrist I had to go back and have my shoulder done again. They were chasing each other. There were two different surgeons, one doing my wrist and one doing my shoulder.”

The surgery didn’t help. In fact, the pain got worse. More operations and complications followed, until Sean was finally told that surgery wouldn’t achieve anything more.

He had lost the use of his arm.

“I can bend my elbow a little bit but I have no strength in my fingers. I can move my thumb a little bit but I can’t hold anything. I couldn’t hold a newspaper between my thumb and fingers.

Going back to sea was out of the question.

“We have a medical every year for our job. I would never pass with my arm the way it is, so that’s more or less put the kebabs on my work.

“The doctors had told me that I wouldn’t go back to work, but just before last Christmas my doctor wrote a letter to the insurance company and gave me a copy. That was the first time I’d seen it in writing – that I’d never work on the sea again.”

Sean was prescribed an opioid drug to help manage the pain, and was referred to a pain specialist. The specialist diagnosed Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS), which can develop as a result of surgery. The main symptom of CRPS is extreme, burning-like pain. It can also cause sensitivity to touch, skin changes, swelling, weakness and decreased function. Sean’s specialist suggested that he consider spinal cord stimulation.

“I was a scared about it at the time,” Sean remembers, “but I didn’t want to go on just swallowing tablets all my life. I thought ‘there’s got to be a better way’.

“I certainly didn’t make my decision on the spur of the moment. I talked to my doctors about it, then I had the temporary stimulator put in and that worked fine, so I decided to go ahead with the permanent one.”

Sean became the sixth person in Australia to receive a rechargeable spinal cord stimulator, a new option for those requiring high-power stimulation for pain relief. The system has a battery that can last for up to nine years. Patients recharge the battery approximately once a month, without interrupting delivery of the pain relieving stimulation.

Sean's stimulator has been successful in alleviating the pain in his arm. "With regards to my left arm it's amazing. Now I live as normal a life as possible."

The journey hasn't been all smooth sailing for Sean, who has experienced some side effects such as numbness and uncomfortable stimulation. "You have to be aware that you have this thing in you... you have to take everything easy. If you move too quickly, the stimulator will let you know."

"I can't sleep with the stimulator on. I take an opioid tablet at night. When that wears off in the morning the pain wakes me up, then I go back on my machine again and it's on all day. It takes about 5 minutes for it to kick in.

"I think with these machines every day is a learning curve. There are side effects, but I know about them now and I'm learning more about my stimulator every day. I know what I'm capable of and what the machine allows me to do.

"For blocking out pain, the stimulator is the way to go. I think that anything where you're not taking lots of drugs – and let's face it, opioids are a pretty heavy drug – is a good thing".

"Given the chance again between having this stimulator or having to spend the rest of my life on drugs, I'd take the stimulator. It's a brilliant invention."