



Shona – Chronic back pain

Like countless other young Aussies, 26 year old public servant Shona was planning a big trip overseas. It was May 1995 and she only had another six months to go before jetting off.

But then a seemingly minor back strain while helping relocate her office put an end to her plans.

“It was a twisting motion – something really simple. We were passing boxes down this big human chain and I was standing next to a guy who was quite tall and I was doing this twisting motion for hours. It just gradually worsened and worsened throughout the day.

“I had actually booked the trip and paid for most of it. I’d be taking 12 months’ leave to travel, meet up with friends, work in London and that kind of thing. I thought ‘it’ll be alright. I’ll just take a couple of paracetamol’. But it wasn’t.

“I went to see a doctor and he said it was muscle strain. He gave me some prescriptions and sent me on my way, but I just didn’t get any better.”

Shona had to postpone her trip. She was in constant pain and taking high doses of medication that left her feeling like she was in a fog. Eventually she had to give up full-time work, keeping a casual job a couple of shifts a week just to pay her rent.

“The days just blended into each other. There were days where I would wake up in the morning and think ‘I set the alarm, I must have something on’ but I’d be so doped up that I wouldn’t remember where I had to go and get back into bed. At 10 o’clock I’d get a call from work saying ‘Are you coming in today?’.

“I ended up realising ‘I can’t live like this’.”

In 1996, 12 months after her injury, Shona was referred to a specialist, who recommended surgery.

“In hindsight it was probably an operation I shouldn’t have had, but at that stage the surgeon said ‘I can fix you’ and that was all I wanted.”

While Shona’s back problems weren’t totally solved by the surgery, she did notice an improvement, and threw herself back into life.

“I decided ‘right, I’m going on this trip. It’s now or never.’ Looking back I probably went too soon and didn’t really think about what I was doing.”

Her travels to London and Africa were plagued with problems, forcing her to return home early.

In 1998, Shona was admitted for a second round of surgery, this time to take out one of the discs in her spine which had completely deteriorated. Four screws and a cage were put in her spine. It made a big difference but Shona was still experiencing pain.

“I felt better for a while but then I’d think ‘I’m still on all these drugs and I’m still not great’. And then I heard about the stimulator.”

“I’d always researched my drugs and looked into anything that was happening in America, because they tend to lead the race. I decided that the stimulator was worth checking out. So I used the internet to do a search and came up with the name of a doctor in Melbourne.”

The doctor agreed that Shona was a good candidate for a stimulator and after a successful trial she received her implant in July 2003.

"It's totally changed my life. I've managed to cut my medication in half – and that's made a huge difference. I don't wake up with a foggy head all the time. Even my self-esteem – I just feel better about myself.

"I can drive to Melbourne now and when I get home I'll be fine. I'll be tired, but who wouldn't be after five hours in the car?"

"I'm back working again, Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm in an art gallery. I've been there for 18 months. I was at a point where I hadn't worked for many years and I didn't know if I'd ever get back to working."

Despite her bubbly personality, ten years after her injury Shona doesn't pretend that it has been an easy journey.

"I lost this huge chunk of my life. It's the period where most people go out and do lots of things, meet a partner, start a family, buy a house... all of that stuff.

"I just lost those years. I spent them in and out of hospitals, seeing specialists, having treatments and tests and x-rays. They almost seem like a blur.

"I was actually really bitter about it for quite a long time but I've learnt to cope. When I walk into a hospital and see other patients I think, 'I've really got nothing to complain about. I've had two major back operations and I'm still upright.'

"Without a stimulator I'd still be on the merry-go-round. I love it. I wouldn't be without it. I can't believe what a difference it has made; it's given me control back of my life.

"I don't have the exhausting constant pain that I had before. It's getting that break that makes all the difference to your day and to being able to cope. If you're not coping emotionally, then the physical effects are so much greater.

"I'm starting to find the person that I used to be prior to all this happening. It's been ten years now, and I'm finally starting to get back to a normal life. It's nice to smile again and actually look forward to tomorrow."