



Falling through the Cracks

It was a particularly long day at work in the Spring of 2000. I entered my apartment well past dinner, walked to my bedroom, and changed into something more comfortable. The phone rang in the pocket of my jacket, draped across my bed. This was at a time when cell phones did not have call display. As I was not expecting anyone's call and was tired from the day's exertions, I debated whether or not to pick it up. Something compelled me to press the "talk" button.

"Hello...who is this?" crackles down the wire.

Resisting every temptation not to hang the phone up, I respond "who is *this*?"

The obviously shaken voice on the phone says "I have found this phone at the scene of a car accident and dialled the last number called."

With my mind racing, the images flashed through my eyes as to who this might be. I asked the woman on the phone for a description. Quite quickly, it becomes obvious that it is my mother. I asked to speak with her and there was a long pause on the other end. She simply replied "That won't be possible. The ambulance is on its way and she will be taken to the local hospital".

I really don't remember much of the drive to the hospital. On a normal day it would take 45 minutes to get there. I know I arrived in less than 30. I burst into the hospital at the same time they were unloading her from the ambulance. They transferred her from one stretcher to another, cut off her clothes in a flash, and quickly wheeled her into another room beyond my sight. I grabbed a nurse and blurted out who I was while wildly pointing and gesturing in the direction that the stretcher just disappeared. She gestured to me to have a seat and said that she would update me as soon as possible.

Sitting was no option as I anxiously paced back and forth- it felt like an eternity before the nurse came back to inform me that there was nothing that they could do for her there and arrangements had been made to transfer her to a major hospital in Toronto.

I asked if I could speak with her. The nurse said that she was not conscious and we must leave the medical staff alone to monitor and treat her the best they could. The nurse suggested that I go home, go to sleep, and go visit her tomorrow, as there was nothing else that could be done this evening.

I remember the drive home from the hospital much better. It was a slow and sombre experience.

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Eighteen hours post accident, she slowly regained consciousness in the hospital room. Extremely disorientated and extremely shaken by the events, she made little sense. Shortly after, the insurance company arrived to have her sign a series of documents and said that they would “take care of everything”. I was not present for the insurance company’s visit, however, I know she was in no condition to comprehend that type of information.

The doctor said nothing regarding the significant trauma she sustained to her head. He instead focused the attention solely to her lower back injuries which confined her to a wheel chair and a walker for some time.

Some weeks later she was released from the hospital and sent home with me under my care. All of the instructions we received were surrounding the back injuries. The word “brain injury” was never used. The repercussions from the quick action of the insurance company resulted in no more compensation than a replacement vehicle and a short period of housing payments. In order to receive this, another document required signing to say that she was all better and that no further claims would be made against them. This document was signed while still needing a walking for mobility.

It took many years to realize that something in the hospital was either missed or purposely withheld from us. My mother suffered a brain injury in that accident and our medical system swept it under the rug.

I have often asked myself why this happened. It is impossible for me to believe that they were unaware of the brain injury. How much more of a classic case can you get? Serious car accident; head injury; long coma; unable to speak when she woke up; memory loss; altered speech.

I wonder how many other Canadians have a similar story. With brain injury not in the media forefront, how many other people suffer brain injuries and are none the wiser? Since it is drilled into us, most people know that if they feel lumps they should go to the doctor and get checked for cancer. They also know that if your left arm goes numb, you could be having a heart attack. But what do Canadians know about brain injury? And why do so many cases go unchecked?

In the ten years following the accident, other serious health complications have crept up. A wide variety of doctors have been involved in treatment and diagnosis. Only one commented that these new ailments could very well have been brought on by the car accident. How does our healthcare system view brain injury? Like a terrible mess to be ignored or avoided at all costs? Like a Pandora’s box that once is opened and acknowledged can never be neatly tucked away again?

The undisclosed brain injury was career ending. Never being able to return to work full time and with a continually diminishing capacity eventually resulted in my mother only being able to work a few hours per week, having to survive off of minimal government disability compensation, and a huge burden of extremely high pharmaceutical expenses needed just to carry on.

With thousands of Canadians suffering from brain injury every year, the need for heightened public awareness and medical accountability surrounding brain injury couldn’t be more important. The more people who know about brain injury, the less

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likely there will be those who fall through the cracks. This is why I have devoted my time to volunteer as executive director of NeuroConnect, a passionate team of individuals who are dedicated to making the lives of people living with brain injury that much better.

-George Armstrong

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