

## Wear Black for Brain Injury Awareness



With a new brain injury occurring every 15 minutes in NZ it is important that people are aware of the impact brain injury has on the person, their family and the community. Researchers have only recently become aware that problems can persist long after the initial injury occurs.

Four years ago Jane was employed in a job she held for the past 12 and a half years. She was

constantly on the go, with a busy job, juggling a career, with a busy home life, two dependent children, sporty pursuits that she shared with her husband, and social activities with friends.

That all changed 4 years ago when Jane became ill with viral meningitis and encephalitis. When her symptoms came on she was initially diagnosed with migraine and vertigo. Jane stayed home but her symptoms got worse including fever, speech difficulty and vomiting. She stayed in hospital for 3 weeks, receiving treatment and her diagnosis was clarified following an MRI scan of her brain. As the result of the inflammation of her meninges (the protective layer under the skull) and the brain tissue, Jane has what is called an Acquired Brain Injury, with long term effects. Jane continued to have follow ups with a Neurologist and was on epilepsy medication to control seizures that she had in her acute stage. This meant she could not drive for a year. The seizure medication added to her range of symptoms of extreme mental and physical fatigue, headaches “foggy head” and her struggle with being forced to slow down.

Jane had hopes that there would be some spontaneous recovery in her brain but follow up scans showed considerable damage to areas that would affect memory, concentration, planning and multi-tasking, and require management of ongoing fatigue.

Jane is a highly motivated person who has always pushed herself to achieve her goals. However, this was a hurdle that would present her greatest challenge. Jane knew she needed extra help and felt she had no clear guidance on what to expect and how to manage symptoms. Jane is not eligible for ACC and was unable to access rehabilitation services normally provided for people with brain injury acquired through physical injury.

A relative made contact with Brain Injury Waikato and they worked with Jane supporting her in her journey to both accepting and finding a new pathway.

“This has involved letting go of ‘the old me’ and learning to live with ‘the new me’, says Jane. “It is an ongoing process”.

Jane is still finding out what she can do without becoming exhausted. Brain Injury Waikato provided her with information about encephalitis and meningitis. They also referred her to a 6 week Memory and fatigue group at the DHB for people with neurological conditions which she found helpful. Jane was able to get some follow up assistance through the Neuropsychologist, facilitating the programme, and with some Occupational Therapist support.

Brain Injury is called the silent epidemic as the effects go largely unseen, but can have long term consequences which impede on the person's quality of life. Brain Injury does not discriminate, it can happen to anyone, anytime, anywhere.

Jane says comments like 'you are looking really well' reflect that people don't understand. Her condition is invisible and won't get better like a broken leg.

March is Brain Injury Awareness month and Brain Injury Waikato are working hard to increase awareness of brain injury in the community. They are also celebrating their 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary and invite people to join them at their Open Day. The theme for Awareness is "black out for brain injury" – you don't need to black out to have concussion.

What: Open Day

When: 23 March 10:30am to 2:30pm

The event will start with a blessing and people sharing how they have benefited from Brain Injury Waikato. Cake cutting will be at 11am. People from the public are welcome to show support by dropping in to have some cake and pick up information about Brain Injury Waikato services. Help raise awareness of brain injury by wearing a black shirt on the day.