

‘I thought I’d never walk or talk again’

Police officer Clodagh Dunlop, 39, from County Londonderry, found herself trapped in a nightmare...

Transfixed by the swirling sea, I barely noticed the darkening sky. But as the rain started to fall, I tilted my face up and let the drops run down my cheeks. My partner, Adrian, had begged doctors to let me come here to the seaside. I was as weak as a rag doll and yet I remember it now as one of the best days of my life because, quite simply, it was a miracle to be there at all.

Four months earlier, I had been hovering between life and death, unable to move or communicate after suffering a stroke that had left me a prisoner in my own body. To be at the seaside, even though I was strapped to a wheelchair, seemed incredible.

My world turned upside down on Easter Monday 2015. My sister Diane had come to visit, but as I went to the door to greet her, I collapsed. I knew straight away that something awful was happening in my brain and begged her to get help, before passing out.

On paper, I was the least likely person

‘Every part of my body was paralysed – except my mind’

Nearly a third of all strokes happen to people aged 20-64. There are over 1.2 million stroke survivors in the UK.

A stroke is a brain attack. It happens when the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off, killing brain cells.

to have a stroke; a fit and active 35-year-old frontline police officer. I now realise that everyone should recognise the warning signs, whatever their age. If I had, things may have been different. The week before it happened, I’d passed out at work, unknowingly suffering a transient ischemic attack (TIA or mini stroke). Because of my age and fitness, doctors put my symptoms down to the 14-hour days I worked in a high pressure job, as well as fitting in a four-mile run every day. I walked away from the hospital assuming I was pushing myself too hard. I took it easy over the next five days, but then came that terrifying collapse on my doorstep. A blood clot had lodged in my brainstem, starving my brain of oxygen and causing a stroke. Rushed to hospital, I suffered a huge seizure, and was put into an induced coma. As I went under, I remember thinking I was going to die.

DEFYING THE ODDS

Incredibly, 36 hours later, I woke up. I was lying in a hospital bed and my whole body was gripped by horrendous pain. I could feel tubes pushing down on my teeth and wires and drips going into my hands. Only, as I went to scream out, I realised that I couldn’t make a sound.

Around me, I could see my family. They were crying. I heard someone question whether I’d survive the day. “I’m here, I can hear you,” I wanted to shout, but every part of my body was paralysed – except my mind. It’s known as “locked-in syndrome”, where you’re aware of what is going on, but can’t speak or move. Often, the condition isn’t recognised – it’s assumed sufferers minds are damaged and that they’re in a vegetative state. I remember feeling absolute terror, but then Adrian looked directly at me and said, “Clodagh, are you there?” I looked back at him, desperately thinking, “Please know that I am, because if you don’t, how will anyone else?”

FINDING STRENGTH

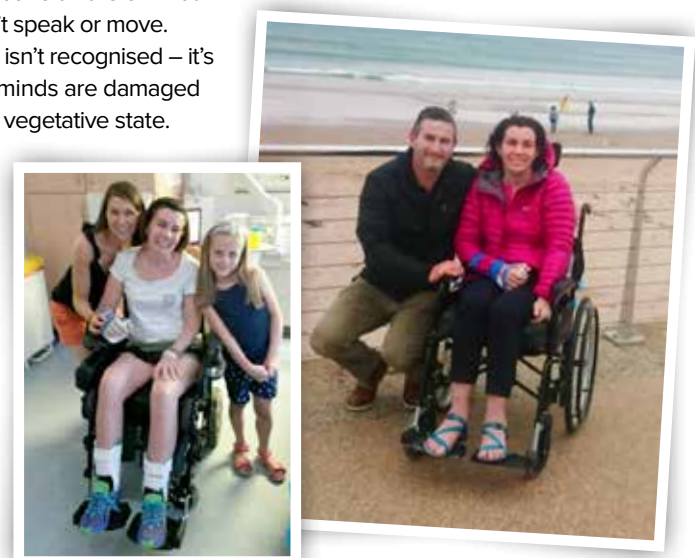
Thankfully, he must have seen something in my eyes because he said softly, “If you can hear me, blink once for yes.” I wasn’t even sure if I could move my eyelids, but somehow I managed to close them and kept them tight shut for as long as I could. When I opened them, he smiled: “You’re going to be okay. We’ll beat this together.”

From that point on, we communicated through blinking – one for “yes”, two for “no”, three for “I love you” and four for “you’re a moron!” It took another 10 days for Adrian and my family to convince the medical staff, and for them to give me a device allowing me to spell out sentences by looking at different letters on a board.

The fear was immense. When a nurse said I may never fully recover, I cried. My family watched distraught as tears rolled down my motionless face without a sound coming from me. In desperation, I spelt out to my sister, “Why didn’t you let me die?” She held my hand and said, “You’ll be okay – you’re too determined not to be.” She never took away my hope.

It was her and Adrian’s positivity that made me realise I had to get better. The only thing I could see was the ceiling and I’d lie there forcing my brain to go over all my special memories – skydiving in Namibia, the birth of my niece, Emily. “I can’t have lived this amazing life only for it to be over,” I told myself.

I even set myself goals. I wanted to be able to scratch an itch at the end of my nose. But progress was so slow. On my





birthday four weeks after my collapse, I was feeling particularly frustrated. Then suddenly, I moved my arm. It was just a centimetre, but it was the first sign that my body might be coming back to life. It gave me hope and I spelt out a message – on my 40th birthday, I would dance at a big party. It seemed such a distant dream, but it gave me something to cling on to.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Adrian and my family visited every day. I begged my sister to do my hair, shave my legs, or file my nails. She called the spelling board “the bossy board” as I kept giving orders. I craved touch, and asked friends to massage body lotion into my arms. People sent letters, and my nieces and nephew made me daily videos. These things brought light into the darkness. I was equally determined to talk, but made such strange noises that other patients jokingly nicknamed me Chewbacca. I didn’t mind the black humour. I saw recovery as my full-time job and worked at it all day long. I spent more than seven months in hospital. I would work with the hospital physio team until I passed out. A typical police officer, I ran headlong into the fight rather than shying away from it. Adrian was incredible. When others thought my ideas were crazy, he’d find

Anyone affected by a stroke, including family, friends and carers, can call the Stroke Association helpline on 0303 3033 100 or email stroke.org.uk.

I had no control over my bladder, but I was back in the real world again and that meant so much.

Finally, after seven and a half months in hospital, I was allowed home. It was both wonderful and hard. I’d see the trappings of my previous life – my trainers and gym kit – and long to be that person again. Some days, I felt like giving up, but Adrian wouldn’t let me.

“Stop wallowing,” he’d say. There were many days when I questioned if I would get my old life back, but there were also incredible victories – on the first anniversary of the stroke, Adrian and

I celebrated by doing a sky dive. It was amazing to feel so free.

Gradually, I regained my voice and my ability to walk. Now, two years on, I’m back at work full-time and have

a way to make them happen. Along with my trip to the seaside, he took me in my wheelchair to a restaurant and the cinema. I couldn’t walk or talk and under my dress I wore a nappy because

passed some of the toughest policing exams. My colleagues have been so supportive of me. I still have weakness on my right side and face challenges every day, but I simply tell myself that so do a lot of people. I also have Adrian, who has remained my rock through everything, making the impossible possible.

It’s still not clear why I had the stroke, although the doctors think a clot may have formed after I suffered whiplash in a motor accident a year earlier.

I don’t take anything for granted. Just touching the carpet with my feet in the morning makes me happy. At work, I have a Chewbacca figure on my desk, and if I ever get stressed, I tell myself,

“There was a time three years ago you would have given everything you had to be where you are right now.” It puts everything in perspective.

I now campaign with the Stroke Association in Northern Ireland to raise

awareness of strokes in younger people, and received the charity’s adult courage award in 2017.

This year, it will be my 40th. I’ve booked my local golf club for a big party. And there, just as I promised as I lay in hospital, surrounded by my family, friends and the incredible medical team who saved me, I’ll dance the night away. It’ll be my way of saying thank you and that finally, I’m back to being me.’

‘I face challenges every day, but so do a lot of people’

HOW TO SPOT THE SIGNS

MORE THAN 100,000 people in the UK suffer a stroke every year, with more people being diagnosed at a younger age. The average age is three to five years younger than it was 20 years ago. The sooner a diagnosis is spotted, the less damage is done. Main symptoms can be remembered with the word FAST:

- FACE** – the face, mouth or eye may droop to one side and the person may not be able to smile.
- ARMS** – the person with suspected stroke may not be able to lift both arms and keep them there.
- SPEECH** – their speech may be slurred or garbled, or the person may not be able to talk despite appearing to be awake.
- TIME** – it’s time to dial 999 immediately if you notice any of these signs or symptoms. Time is of the essence.

A mini stroke (TIA) may cause similar symptoms that then disappear. They must be acted on as a TIA indicates a raised chance of future strokes’.