



... A RUPTURED BRAIN ANEURYSM

BY *Melody Wren*

Here's a little-known but disturbing fact: According to the Brain Aneurysm Foundation, about 50% of people who have ruptured brain aneurysms die, and 66% of the survivors have major cognitive deficiencies from brain damage. Luckily, it is extremely rare for aneurysms to rupture—only 1 in 100 do. Unfortunately for me, mine did.

What happened? A decade ago, when I was 59, I woke up at our cottage on the Bruce Peninsula in Ontario, Canada, had a shower, made tea and got back into bed. Nestled in my happy place next to my sleeping husband, I read magazines and made notes for some travel writing I was doing. Suddenly, I felt a severe jolt of intense pain in my head. That was the last thing I remember before I lost consciousness.

My husband woke beside me as I made “weird noises,” as he said later. He tried to rouse me with no luck and called 911.

By the time I arrived at our small local hospital, I had regained consciousness. I was seen by a resident, who consulted her supervisor. After a few hours of routine tests, she told me

I'd had a “migraine,” and I was discharged with instructions to return in 48 hours if there was no change.

There was no change. And after a day and a half of agonizing pain, I told my husband, “Something is really wrong with my head.” I didn't care that we hadn't waited the prescribed 48 hours; in order for me to be taken seriously and not fobbed off as a migraine victim, we returned to the hospital.

I was seen by a different doctor and got a CT scan. It showed dark residue below my brain, which was the iron from the hemoglobin of the blood that had leaked to that spot. I'd had an aneurysm, and it had burst. This was beyond my doctor's scope of care. “We need to get you to a hospital specializing in neurology,” he said.

I was medevaced to a new hospital, where a neurosurgeon explained that they needed to stop the bleeding in a small vessel at the front of my brain. He would go in through my groin and pass a thin tube through my arteries and up into my head. If that didn't stop the bleeding, he would do “windowpane surgery,” drilling a hole in my head.

“No, absolutely not! No one is drilling a hole in my head,” I insisted. I then turned to my husband and my brother, who had joined us: “If things go wrong and it looks like I'm going to be a vegetable, DO NOT go to any extraordinary measures to keep me alive.”

My brother said, “You are going to be absolutely fine.”

I wasn't having it. I pointed my finger



at them and said, "Tell me you have heard what I just said."

Fortunately, going through the groin worked. Once the tube was in place, thin platinum wires were threaded through it until they coiled into the bubble-shaped aneurysm, allowing the blood to coagulate in it and stop the bleeding. The coiled wires will be in my skull permanently. I seem to be in famous company. The aneurysm survivors club include Emilia Clarke from *Game of Thrones*, Sharon Stone, Quincy Jones and Neil Young.

A NURSE PICKED UP A SPOON AND ASKED ME WHAT IT WAS. I SAID IT WAS A PEN.

I spent my post-surgery days resting and getting tested. To make sure that I hadn't lost brain functionality, my surgeon would come into my hospital room every day with a group of medical residents and ask me the same questions: "What is the date? Where are you? Does a stone sink in water? Do you peel a banana before you eat it?" All of which I answered.

Things seemed to be going well. Then one day, while sitting upright in a chair, I started sliding off sideways and couldn't stop. My roommate called for a nurse, and I ended up in neurological intensive care. It turned out my sodium

level had plummeted and I'd suffered a mild seizure. My body was processing sodium correctly, but the damaged part of my brain was unable to keep the sodium levels in my blood at the correct range. My husband and adult children were told to rush over to the hospital, as the doctors didn't expect me to survive. Revved up on morphine and low on salt, my mind was swimming. As my kids came rushing into my room, all I could think to say was, "Did you bring fruit? I'm craving fruit."

I didn't die, but I did end up in intensive care again less than a week later. During one of my cognitive tests, a nurse held up a pen and asked me what it was. I said it was a pen. She then picked up a spoon, and I said it was a pen. A notebook was a pen. Four or five different items, I referred to as pens. My sodium level had plummeted again.

A month after paramedics had loaded me into an ambulance, I was back home. Weak and unable to walk more than a few steps, I spent most of the day in bed.

My recovery was not easy. I had several different types of headaches, including knifelike stabbing, numbing pain, painful bristling and one that was just a steady ache. Through it all, I experienced a constant clicking sound in my head. Later I discovered that it wasn't something that I was hearing but was part of the repair response itself. If I got overtired, flashing images, like a Rolodex flipping too fast, went through my brain. The images moved

Melody Wren and her husband on the high seas, after her aneurysm scare



tricks to recover faster. I took walks around the block with my husband that gradually went from slow to less slow. I was pushing myself. At one point, my brother said, “It’s not a race to recover.” But when dealing with a brain injury, I felt it was imperative that I do as much as possible, and I did.

Six months after surgery, the brain fog lifted, and I felt a huge sense of relief. But I didn’t just return to who I was. A friend of mine says that I put my foot on the gas pedal after my ruptured aneurysm and haven’t stopped since. It’s true. I’m more active now, traveling often, seeking adventures and keeping in touch with friends and family.

Recently I had a check-in with my neurosurgeon. He asked if he could continue to track my progress yearly. I asked if he does that with his other patients who are in the same situation. He told me that with the low survival rate, there weren’t many of us. “We will celebrate your 10 years of survival together,” he added.

And we will, this coming July. I am one of the lucky ones. **R**

so fast I couldn’t tell what they were, as if someone were pushing a fast-forward button.

Apparently, all this is quite common after neurosurgery, as was the fact that my brain was in a complete fog, preventing me from understanding ideas or comprehending words. I’m a chatterbox who loves spending time with my husband, kids and grandkids. But my brain fog made following conversations nearly impossible.

Because of the low rate of survival without brain damage, there were few guidelines for recovery, so I designed my own. I watched foreign films and read novels to try to exercise my brain. I tore through *The Brain’s Way of Healing*, by Norman Doidge, which taught me