



Thoughts from a Dad – David Crisp

The telephone call was unexpected - Al's friend Jay calling to say Al had broken both wrists and an ankle in a fall. I had to laugh - what else does a father do when someone he only knows casually calls to tell you your son is hurt. The laughter died quickly as Jay went on in a sober voice to say there was a potentially worse injury to Al's back. He was in Aberystwyth hospital but was stable and they were trying to work out the extent of his injuries.

The first week was tough. My memories of Aberystwyth went back to a Sunday night late arrival nearly 30 years ago: no food anywhere and, worse, the pubs were closed for Sunday. Fortunately now, the hospital staff were fantastic and there was good food available everywhere.

Al however was in a bad way. The realisation that he was seriously hurt had sunk in through the painkillers, and the fear of the unknown extent of the back injury and the ramifications of it flooded to the surface as feeling came and went from his legs and having no bladder function added to his fears.

It was clear that all I could do was ensure all the staff kept the best possible standards around him, the easy part thanks to their excellent training, and to try and get his head in the right place. The sooner Al could get his expectations and consequently his fears under control the better. For now, he had to live absolutely in the present. Forget about the fall and the reasons for it; the hangover had gone anyway. Forget about what he had planned to do over the next month. Forget about what might lie ahead. His mind had to be centred totally in the present: he had to accept that he was no longer in control, he was in the hands of the medical staff.

I could do minor things to keep him comfortable and I could organise his affairs as much as possible. It was clear there was huge support from his friends and from Outward Bound, where he worked. What was this place Gobowen that everyone talked about with such reverence? How could I get him the best care? Where should it be - close to family or close to friends.

As the first week went on I learnt more about the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt hospital at Gobowen, near Oswestry, one of the top spinal units in the country. It was close enough to his friends who were very quickly organising a visiting rota and not impossible for frequent family visits. What a godsend this hospital proved to

be. The quality of the assessment and care was absolutely first class, no matter what political messing about with the health service goes on, at its heart lies these dedicated, intelligent and caring people.

Al was lucky, although seriously hurt, with a piece of bone protruding into his spinal column, there was a chance he would recover completely, given the right behaviour from him and the right treatment. The broken wrists and the heel would heal while he was immobilised for the spinal injury. Imagine a fit young outdoors man cooped up in a bed, unable to move for weeks. But his mind was now in good shape, his friends gave him huge support travelling regularly from Aberdovey to Gobowen. Everything that could be done was being done and he could just about accept the fact that he would lose a year of his life in recovery mode.

It was not easy, eventually he was allowed up, still in a heel cast or moonboot and in a waist to neck plaster that itched like hell. Trips to the gym started the long road to recovery. He worked hard, driving himself in the gym and with his weights, still uncertain just how much bodily function he would lose.

I never thought I would see the day when with the Flexifoil aloft he left the beach in Wicklow, bound for The Crossing. Thank you, all of you, you know who you are and I cannot tell you how important you have been in Al's recovery and in your support for the crossing, without you, who knows where he would have been.