

TURNING ADVERSITY into inspiration

SPEECH THERAPY PLAYED A LARGE ROLE IN THE RECOVERY OF STROKE SURVIVOR EMMA GEE. A NEW BOOK DETAILS HER INSIGHTS INTO THE EVERYDAY BATTLES OF STROKE SURVIVORS AND SHARES HER GOAL TO ALLEVIATE THE THERAPIST-PATIENT KNOWLEDGE GAP.

IT'S A DISEASE OFTEN associated with older age. Truth is, it doesn't discriminate and can strike without prior warning.

According to Speech Pathology Australia statistics every 10 minutes, an Australian suffers a stroke. That's around 60,000 per year. Further statistics are sobering, 60 per cent of people who have a stroke will develop dysphagia, while around 20 per cent will have difficulty using speech.

That was the reality for Emma Gee when aged just 24. Pre-stroke Emma worked as an occupational therapist, focusing on neurology in stroke survivors. She was confident, happy, fit and healthy.

Life was as she'd planned. But life doesn't always follow a script.

As an avid long distance runner, Emma thought nothing of a knee injury and assumed a routine surgery would be just that.

During the surgery, it was discovered Emma had arteriovenous malformation (AVM) - a tangle of abnormal and poorly formed blood vessels (arteries and veins). It's estimated that only 200-500 people in the world have AVM.

Only one of the five specialist surgeons in the world agreed to operate on Emma. Through complications in the surgery she suffered a stroke.

After a nine day coma, she awoke to a different world. Spinning double vision, bed ridden and unable to communicate. Doctors surrounded her nervously hoping for the best.

With no ability to talk or swallow Emma felt isolated, trapped and forgotten. This bright, confident young woman was a shell of her former self.

"I was lost. I couldn't go back to my old life but there was nothing to go forward to," she said.

Family and friends desperately tried to accommodate her needs but a helpless Emma was unable to communicate with them.

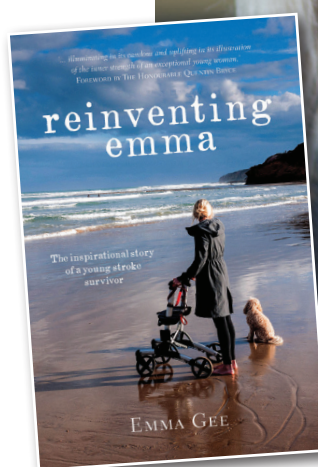
Commonly used communication boards didn't help her, only causing further communication delay. "The board contained signs and words but it was tiny and unsuitable. When I regained movement, I couldn't point to what I wanted as it was too small. I'd try and point to 'I'm hungry' but was bombarded with warm blankets," she said.

Over countless months, her speech pathologist retaught Emma to speak and swallow. It was persistence that paid off.

"I did so many tongue and breathing exercises, but it worked. Although I can get tired in my speech still, I'm able to speak



Stroke survivor Emma Gee.



"I was told I had to sing before I can swim."

clearly," Emma said with a sense of achievement.

Ever the fitness fanatic, Emma wanted recovery to involve exercise-swimming but at the time her breathing was still too weak.

Emma recalled a conversation with her speech pathologist. "I was told I had to sing before I can swim."

Now as an occupational therapy consultant, Emma has rare insight into the daily battles of stroke sufferers. It's her mission to alleviate the therapist-patient knowledge gap, allowing both to understand each other better.

Emma's story is not uncommon. Speech Pathology Australia estimates that in the next 10 years more than half a million people will suffer a stroke, making it the leading cause of disability in Australia.

Emma's book *Reinventing Emma* details her experience as a stroke survivor. Further information on Emma can be found on her website: www.emma-gee.com.

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