

Patient story

On 2 January 2013 Hannah Green, 47, suffered a stroke with devastating consequences. Here, we talk to her, and her husband Andrew, about her experience and find out how she's slowly re-building her life.

"It was my first day back at work after the Christmas break," says Hannah, who lives in Maidstone with her husband and two teenage children.

"As a visual merchandiser at Notcutts Garden Centre, Newnham Court, the start of the new year is always an extremely busy period as we prepare for the sales and change the displays, so I had a lot of jobs to sort out," she added.

"About half way through the morning I started to feel a little unwell and noticed that I couldn't hold a pricing gun properly. I stopped marking up the sales items and I slowly became aware I'd lost the use of my right arm."

Hannah stopped what she was doing and went and sat down hoping her symptoms would pass quickly if she rested, while a colleague phoned her husband Andrew, who also worked at the garden centre, to come and get her.

"It did pop into my mind that I may have had a stroke, but because I was young, felt okay, my speech was good and my face wasn't drooping I wasn't particularly worried," added Hannah.

As a precaution, Andrew drove Hannah to the A&E department at Maidstone Hospital to get checked over by a doctor. Hannah said: "I walked into A&E and booked myself in with the receptionist then took a seat to wait to be seen by one of the doctors. The last thing I remember was chatting and laughing with Andrew in the waiting area."

About half an hour after arriving at Maidstone Hospital, Hannah collapsed into her husband's arms. Andrew said: "Hannah's eyes were rolling and she was completely unresponsive. I called out to get some help and a nurse rushed over. She looked at Hannah's eyes and immediately took her through for a series of tests and scans."

Two hours later and Hannah was taken to the stroke ward. "She was in a deep coma and I was told she had suffered a stroke," added Andrew.

However, two days later on Friday, 4 January, Andrew received a call to tell him that Hannah needed to be transferred immediately to Kings College Hospital in London for a life-saving operation. Andrew explained: "I was told Hannah had severe swelling on the right side of her head and some of her skull needed to be removed to relieve the pressure. Doctors told me to prepare for the worst so I was very worried both for Hannah and for my young daughters."

She was taken to Kings where she underwent a five-hour operation, which was successful. Doctors also performed a tracheostomy at the same time.

On 10 January, eight days after her stroke, Hannah came out of her coma. Andrew said: "Because of the severity of Hannah's stroke doctors couldn't tell me how she would be affected. We didn't know what to expect in terms of her long-term prognosis and because of her tracheostomy we couldn't work out whether she would even be able to talk."

He added: "During Hannah's stay at Kings she started to communicate with me using a pen and notebook and I began to have a little hope that the effects of the stroke may not be as severe as anticipated. I took in a photograph of our two daughters and I asked her to point to our eldest daughter and she understood what I was asking, so I was very relieved and I started to be even more hopeful about the future."

After three weeks at Kings, Hannah was transferred back to Maidstone Hospital, initially to Whatman Ward until her tracheostomy tube was removed, and then to the stroke unit.

Hannah said: "When I was moved to the stroke unit my rehabilitation started. Although my speech was fine, I had to re-learn all the basic motor skills. I had to do exercises to strengthen my neck, arm and leg muscles as I couldn't swallow properly or even sit up.

"Progress was very, very slow, which I found rather frustrating, but I was determined to regain mobility. I spent around six months on the stroke unit and in June 2013 I took my first couple of steps with a walking stick, which I was delighted with."

At the end of June Hannah was transferred to Sevenoaks Community Hospital for intensive rehabilitation. "I spent a further three and a half months at Sevenoaks Community Hospital undertaking physiotherapy, speech therapy and psychological support. Much of the work they did with me was preparing me to be discharged home," explained Hannah.

She added: "Our house had to be assessed and a range of aids were fitted, such as installing a hoist and hospital-style bed as well as rails and various other items to help me either be as independent as possible or help my carers support me.

"On 14 October I finally returned home and it felt fantastic! I was absolutely delighted, but knew I still had a very long way to go. When I first got home I could only walk a few steps aided and couldn't climb stairs. Now I have made some progress over the past year and have completed a sponsored walk, had the hoist removed from my home and can walk up the stairs and to the bathroom."

Unfortunately during Hannah's nine-month recovery in hospital, she also had to cope with the death of both her beloved mother and father.

Hannah said: "2013 was an absolutely horrendous year. In February my Mum was diagnosed with cancer and received her chemotherapy at Maidstone Hospital. Staff on the stroke ward were so caring and thoughtful to me and when my mum was having her treatment session every three weeks, they wheeled my hospital bed round to her ward so that I could be with her.

"However I received further devastating news in April when I was told by ward staff that my father had been admitted to A&E after having a heart attack. I was taken to see him to say my final goodbyes and he passed away shortly after. The staff were terrific to me and one of the nurses form

the stroke unit even came in on her day off to help me get ready so that I could attend my father's funeral. My mother then passed away in November.

"Despite struggling with my grief, I have tried to focus on my rehabilitation over the past year. While I would advise anyone to bear in mind that recovery takes time, to be patient and to take each day at a time it's also important to recognise that rehabilitation can be very frustrating as you have to re-learn even the simplest of tasks, which can be a very slow process.

"My goal for the next few months is to become more independent and I'm working with my carers to try and cook a meal for my family. My life is very different now and I'm taking it a step at a time, but I am determined to move things forward quickly and ultimately I want to return to work.

"Everyone at Maidstone Hospital, from the nurses to the physiotherapists to the support workers, has been amazing and I can't thank them enough for all they've done for me and my family. They were so compassionate during the illnesses of both my parents and when I was down or fed up because my recovery from the stroke was slow they did everything they could to cheer me up and encourage me to keep on trying."

Stroke patient Hannah Green develops new garden at hospital

Hannah Green was so inspired to help other stroke patients that she is project managing the development of a new garden, which is located next to the stroke unit at Maidstone Hospital.

So far Hannah has raised around £5,000, which is being used to transform a small grassy area. Hannah said: "Patients that are undergoing rehabilitation following a stroke want to be able to enjoy the sunshine, have the opportunity for some peace or be able to have some of their physiotherapy sessions outside.

"During my long recovery in hospital it was difficult to get my wheelchair over the rough grass outside the stroke unit. I wanted to be able to create a tranquil area away from the ward and put in some beautiful plants to make the area as attractive as possible. Gardening can also be a really useful therapy for stroke patients."

Work started on the garden a couple of months ago and so far the area has been flattened and tarmacked, allowing patients to get their wheelchairs outside. Plans are now being developed to build raised beds and set up a gardening club for stroke patients at the unit.

"Some of the money I've donated has been used to buy two benches for the stroke garden in memory of my mum and dad. This will create an attractive seating area for patients, their family and friends, and staff to enjoy."

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Life after stroke

Television celebrity, Kim Woodburn's husband, Peter (68), had always been in good health, until one day in May last year, when he lost feeling in his right side and began to struggle to speak. Kim knew immediately that he had suffered a stroke and Peter was admitted to Tunbridge Wells Hospital for emergency tests and treatment...

"Peter has always been in good health – with low blood pressure, low cholesterol, no pills for anything," said Kim, "In 34 years of marriage he has rarely complained of feeling ill so it was strange when, one Saturday evening in May last year, he said he had a bad headache on one side of his head."

Peter decided to go to bed early to try and shift the headache and then got up as usual the following day to read the Sunday newspapers with Kim.

"He was trying to read something out loud to me and he just couldn't get a word out, it kept coming out wrong. It did seem strange but wasn't enough to set alarm bells ringing at that point," Kim explained. "He didn't tell me that after it happened, he went out into the garden and while out there, he didn't realise his slipper had come off and that he couldn't feel his bare foot on the pebbles underneath. If he had told me, I would have known that something was very wrong. It wasn't until the next day, Monday, that Peter brought two cups of tea out into the garden, where I was sitting, and the tea in the cup in his right hand was spilling all over the place. I asked him what was wrong and he told me he couldn't feel down his right side. I knew immediately what had happened."

Kim called an ambulance which arrived in eight minutes and took Peter from their former home in Crowborough, to Tunbridge Wells Hospital at Pembury.

Kim said: "Within three or four hours of arriving at the hospital, Peter had been given every test under the sun. The staff were absolutely amazing and looked after us from the moment we arrived. They were reassuring, calm, charming and they knew instantly that Peter had suffered a stroke.

"The stroke in itself seemed very strange. Peter has always had low blood pressure so obviously, the thought of him being at risk of a stroke hadn't even entered our minds. However, the doctors did tell us that one of Peter's carotid arteries was much narrower than the others, which is something he may have been born with. As the artery was particularly narrow, this might have caused a problem with blood flow, which then could have caused the stroke."

Fortunately, the stroke was mild and after two days in hospital, Peter was discharged home with medication and instructions to rest. Over the last eight months, he has regained most of the feeling in his face and arm. His leg is also improving although he still has no feeling in his toes. While his speech is no longer slurred, he sometimes struggles to say what he wants to.

“Because Peter can’t feel the toes on his right foot, he does limp a little bit, although most people wouldn’t notice. He can get rather frustrated by the fact that although he knows what he wants to say to me, and can picture the word, he sometimes can’t quite get it out and I have to prompt him. It also bothers him that his short-term memory suffered, and is still suffering, following his stroke. He can tell me something he did two or ten years ago in great detail but can find recalling something from a few minutes before very difficult. He also gets tired very easily and he doesn’t have a lot of physical strength. It frustrates him hugely that we have to ask for help to lift things or to do small DIY jobs around the house. Even when there are things he can do, I limit how much he takes on because it’s so important that he doesn’t overdo it while he is still recovering,” Kim said.

“Despite the frustrations though, I remember saying to him that however hard it seems, we are lucky. His stroke was a mild one. He can walk, talk and live a fairly normal life. Other people have far worse experiences and we have to remember that. We are also fortunate in that Peter is a retired policeman, as well as the fact that I have been able to cut down on the work that I do, which means I can be here as much as he needs me to be. We have a lovely home and all the time we need to take it easy and allow Peter to recover. Younger stroke victims might have jobs, mortgages, children and all sorts of other things which make their situation incredibly hard.”

“If I have one piece of advice to people in similar situations it would be to get help when you need it, there is no shame in it. Your life changes and it’s hard to adjust. You have to accept help from the experts – it’s part of the journey to getting better and no one should feel ashamed about it, said Kim.

“And in terms of advice for those caring for the person who has had the stroke, the most important thing, I would say, is to be patient with them. It can be very hard as you expect them to be like they were before, and able to do the same things in the same way, but they can’t. You have to give it time and remember how much they have been through. Try to lighten the situation for them when you can, it’s hugely important to stay positive for everyone’s benefit.”

Every year there are approximately 152,000 strokes in the UK. That's one stroke every five minutes. Most people affected are over 65, but anyone can have a stroke.

Stroke changes lives.

It can have a huge effect on you and your family and will be likely to want to know as much as you can about what practical, emotional and financial support is available.

Visit the Stroke Association website for more information and advice – www.stroke.org.uk

The Stroke Association’s top five tips to help reduce the risk of stroke:

1. Know your blood pressure. Around half of strokes could be prevented if people with high blood pressure took steps to control it. Have yours checked at your pharmacy or GP surgery.
2. Check your pulse. Atrial fibrillation is the most common type of irregular heartbeat and can increase your risk of a stroke by up to five times. Visit your GP if you think you may have an irregular pulse.
3. Stop smoking. It doubles your risk of a stroke.
4. Take regular exercise. A brisk walk for half an hour five days a week can reduce your risk. Or, even better, why not try something a bit more ambitious? The Stroke Association hosts resolution runs all over the country: visit stroke.org.uk/resolution to join in.
5. Eat less salt. It can increase blood pressure so try to eat a healthy balanced diet.