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Poetry through Soul

Trevor Clark

Trevor Clark usually works as a bulk fuel truck driver. He has a passion for poetry, writing and guitar playing which he uses as a sounding board for reflective learning and development. He also believes that supportive family and friends are critical to maintaining his well-being. Sustaining recovery is a reality Trevor deals with every day and believes patients who embrace their condition fully can direct their recovery and maintain positive mental health for themselves and those involved in their lives. Currently, Trevor is working on his first novel while he recovers from physical injuries incurred on his quest for autonomy and place. Managing his mental health is of paramount importance to Trevor and even though this may be trying at times, he lives and works happily with his condition.

Key words: *mental health, poetry, writing, consumer.*

The association between chronic pain and mental disorders is well known.^{1,2} However, for those of us who have an existing mental illness, this leads to a double jeopardy. In previous articles in this journal I have written about my experience of mental illness and the importance of creativity in my own recovery.^{3,4} In what follows I will discuss how that double jeopardy can be compounded by the wider health system.

However, I would like to start with a poem I recently found in my files while I was trying to understand the barriers to getting pain relief for physical injuries from several general practitioners (GPs). These injuries have tested my strength of character, my job prospects as a bulk fuel truck driver (a job I valued and enjoyed) and my mental health.

Sustained physical pain is testing on a person's emotional and mental state (in my case being already a patient with schizo-affective disorder). What I now believe was medical mistreatment due to what I have termed in the poem that concludes this paper – a “pen lie” – caused my mind to slip at moments of sustained extreme physical pain into the edge effects of psychosis. The poem I re-discovered is titled “Walk On” and comes from an earlier time, but illustrates how horrible it feels to have had to suffer once again in this way.

Walk On

(1997)

I still hear the laughing.

Walk on. Walk on.

I hear the mockery.

Walk on. Walk on.

In this place it rests –

As I do.

All day, all day.

Trevor Clark

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Only if I let it.
 Walk on. Walk on.
 Voices mocking, laughing;
 My heart cries.
 Walk on. Walk on.
 More tests, no rest.
 Always laughing, mocking.
 It is hard. I.
 Walk on. Walk on.
 Days and nights I push.
 Get in your place.
 Walk on. Walk on.
 Laughing, mocking, staring and glaring.
 Walk on. Walk on.
 Guilt never rests,
 My mind is always a mess.
 Walk on. Walk on.
 I feel good.
 I feel bad.
 Walk on. Walk on.
 My reality is a series
 Of highs and lows.
 Never medium, never rare.
 On then off.
 Walk on. Walk on.
 I am sane and insane;
 Within a moment it changes.
 Walk on. Walk on
 My heart aches.
 My mind is a mess. I.
 Walk on.

For the 2006 and 2008 *Creating Futures* conferences in Cairns I presented poems and thoughts on self-directed recovery which were published in this journal. For the

2010 conference I would have liked to introduce the concept of the progression from self-directed recovery to self-management of mental illness for the patient. "Novel poetry" was meant to be my topic but, as luck will have it, that did not occur as I was derailed by events and my experiences within the GP system.

Although it is only my opinion, though gained through direct personal experience, education of GPs concerning mental illness seems seriously lacking, thus affecting the lives of patients in their various stages of recovery – or not. When an injury required me to seek help from a new provider I found to my horror that even though recovered and managing well with my condition, that the label or stigma surrounding my "diagnosis" directly affected the treatment plan (of which there seemed none) of my physical complaints.

So, as a series of flow-on events, my life literally crumbled around me in the lead-up to the 2010 conference. Earlier, I had quit work with a fuel company as a result of safety issues that would have directly affected not only my safety, but also my hip pocket. My physical pain due to a truck accident I sustained while I was working as a sugar cane haul-out driver in 2008 had also increased during the previous year. But I was managing the pain with over-the-counter pain killers, physiotherapy and the occasional visit to the chiropractor.

Reflection has allowed me to see that the physical pain I endured was out of the sheer folly (to paraphrase Foucault) of my passion – my passion for work. My inner drive was to save money to give me time off to finish my first novel. While I have never liked being a financial burden on society, this year I have had to eat humble pie and be exposed to the consequence of a comment on my fourteen year old psychiatric file, a comment I was totally unaware of. I know now that this one comment has directly affected my physical and mental health, personal relationships, job prospects, financial welfare and of course, unfortunately, my ability to secure appropriate pain relief for my injuries. It trumped the growth and gains of the last fourteen years.

In brief, I visited a GP in Brisbane for the pain in my shoulder in early 2009. When I informed him that I was taking an antipsychotic medication I was instantly interrogated about my motives and ability to drive fuel trucks. There was clearly an insinuation based on the stigma surrounding my well managed psychiatric condition. This resulted in having to prove myself by going to see a private psychiatrist (for a decade my condition has been managed by other GPs, I had been on a depot until 2002 and on olanzapine from then and had not needed to see a psychiatrist since 2000) who cleared me. Because I was working, I missed the next appointment three months later and although I had called his office to cancel, I was reported to the Transport Department. The pain I was experiencing in my shoulder and back went unrelieved.

Per Foucault, I felt like a leper – an outcast. Until this time I thought I had proven myself and my mental

stability by my actions, work ethic, personal relationships – and my writing. My physical pain began to increase. Were these professionals only seeing me as a condition?

I knew that the pain I was experiencing was from the injury in 2008 and in June 2010 I was told that calcific tendonitis had developed in my shoulder. If I can blame anyone for this course of events it is myself – because of the passionate way I look at my life and aspirations.

Broken down to a rudimentary lifestyle, with little money to pay bills and get by, my inner drive kept me going. So did my poetry, writing and guitar playing; they are my way of coping and managing these trying events. It is my way of expressing and exploring, to better understand myself and the events that sometimes threaten to overtake me. Only indirectly did I find out that my record included (incorrect) statements to the effect that I had been on a methadone program. So – I was also a “drug seeker”. “The Flame that Burns” below is a mantra I wrote to tell myself to hold on and have faith in the systems that are in place.

The Flame that Burns

(September 2010)

The candle flame,
So light, so discrete;
Enables me to see,
Enables me to seek.

The flame that was once a fire,
Roars low now.

I filled my desire.

That single candle burns now;
Solid, steady, quiet and proud.

I remember the times;
The heartaches and the fires.
The cool sea breeze soothes me;
My lone candle reassures me.

The love I had is returning.
Back to my soul,
Back to my life;
Back to what I was born to be like.

I am lucky to have a great network of supportive family and friends who have helped me through what I would consider the hardest test of my life; not all are so lucky. I hesitate to think what another less fortunate person

would do in the same circumstances. To illustrate the value of family and friends I recently penned the following poem, “Tranquillity”. It tells me that I am not alone in pain and anguish and that, at the very least, understanding is possible through shared experience.

Tranquillity

(August 2010)

I came here for the peace;
Away from the bustle and the hustle.
Those days for me have gone by.

Now, I sit on old mate’s veranda;
He is strong and he is true.

But, I have to say –
You wouldn’t want to blue.

John’s been around and he has been down;
He gets up every time;
Every time someone tries running him down.

The view is spectacular.
Guests and friends can postulate:
So freely in Tranquillity.

So, you will see Gentleman John;
You’ll laugh and feel free,
Free as the birds here in Tranquillity.

It is the only track we know;
That is built hard and true.
By perseverance, by time:
By being true.

See you at Gentleman Johns;
We’ll all be grinning here.
Away from the trouble and strife.

Here it is – it is,
Tranquillity.

Reflection is great, but the process of trying to find out the basis of the doctor’s mis-belief that I was a drug seeker who had been on methadone, while at the same time trying to get relief from pain, brought back hallucinations, sleeplessness and aberrant, foolish and angry behaviour towards

my loved ones, friends – and practitioners. Untreated pain – pure and intense physical pain – led to this display of stupid behaviour. I feel ashamed that I allowed myself to succumb. The reason was a “pen lie” that made my search for pain relief difficult, near on impossible. I only discovered this fact by insisting on having my records checked. I needed this for the benefit of my “self”.

Maybe what I have illustrated in this piece can start a conversation about what I have not said but implied indirectly; implied and experienced for the benefit – on reflection – for the betterment of my fellow patients of mental illness.

Pen Lie

(October 2010)

It was so complicated;
It really was such a real mess.
Fifteen years of my life built around,
Someone else's lie.
The lie of their pen;
An act of bastardry from
That commentator's pen lie.

There was so much pain;
So much didn't stop my train.
That old girl came through;
Came through to me on that train.
She was just trying to show me to
Get through, up and over that pen lie.

I lived in and with that pain;
It engulfed me and made me see.
Someone else's lying pen is what did this to me;
Someone else's scene.
The scene they saw that was not really me.

Seeking my way;
Searching for an honest brain;
To understand what they had done to me.
I went through all that pain unknowingly but aware.
That awareness was instinct, my instinct.
That instinct showed me that someone's
dirty pen lie

Was trying to stop me.
I was a walking, living painful mess.
Injured and battered but it was my heart;
My heart and soul that mattered during duress.

My instinct set me free;
Free from that pen that lied on
Some ancient record of mine.

How do you explain about a pen lie?
Why should you try to prove?
Innocence in a world gone mad;
Mad on misunderstanding, mad on pen lies.

That one lie made me act foolishly;
That pen lie deserves no air time.

I am still around though;
Injured battered and torn,
But happy to have defeated that dirty
Dirty pen lie from an unseeing eye.

Now I will go forward, never look back.

I dug deep;
I know what happened to me.
I had to live a life of pain and doubt,
Because of one hidden and unseen pen lie.

Take my life back and go forward,
With my friends who now see;
Consequence,
Consequence so painful from that one, singular
dirty, dirty
Pen lie.

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