Always Darkest Before The Dawn

Samuel J. Keyser

Saturday, April 26, 2014 was a red-letter day. The Aardvark Jazz Orchestra was giving its annual Spring concert at MIT. I played second trombone. I was looking forward to that concert the way a kid looks forward to Christmas.

I began the day by stretching. I stood at the bottom of the second floor stairs. I raised my left leg to the fourth step. Suddenly my right leg collapsed and I fell flat on my back. Because of an abnormally narrow spinal column I never knew I had, I had been an accident waiting to happen for 30 years. Its time had come. Bone spurs hacked away at my spinal cord like tiny hatchets. Hands began to slap me in the face. I had no idea who they belonged to. I batted at the air like an upended turtle. Saturday, April 26, 2014 had suddenly changed color. It had become the darkest day of my life.

My wife called 911. The first responders were there in minutes. The one in charge realized immediately that I had suffered a spinal cord injury (SCI). He immobilized my head and raced me to the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) where I spent 33 days, 23 of them in ICU and 13 1/2 hours in surgery. The first responders and the entire MGH team had saved my life.

When I left MGH, I went to a nearby rehabilitation hospital where I spent most of my Medicare allotted seven weeks in quarantine recovering from post-surgical infections. Once Medicare was exhausted, I had to leave.

My rehab didn't begin in earnest until I arrived at the SCI Center in West Roxbury at the Boston VA. Almost from the very beginning I felt as if I had died and gone to SCI heaven. The doctors, the nurses, the aides, the therapists all had the blessed freedom to administer care unshackled by the world of insurance. All they cared about was how much better they could make me.

During his visit to VA Boston Healthcare System (VABHS), I had a chance to talk to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Hon. Robert McDonald. He told me that while there were people who wanted to do away with the VA healthcare system, he thought it was a model for the country. I told him I couldn't agree more. The VABHS SCI program was superb. I consider myself a case in point.

When I first entered VABHS, I was a 79 year old whose physical life had shrunk to that of an infant. I was quadriplegic. My hands were frozen into a position that looked as if I wanted to strangle someone. I couldn't move my toes. Because of the pull of gravity, I couldn't scratch my nose, brush my teeth, feed myself, use the bathroom.

When I left VABHS to become an outpatient four months later, I could do all those things and much more. I have a real chance to walk again. I could not have done that without Jess, Barbara, Teresa, Eileen, Jim, Lee, Michelle, Amy, Kara, Anthony, Denise, Bernadette, Diana and all the physical and occupational therapists who wouldn't give up on me. If I had in fact died and gone to SCI heaven, my therapists would be my better angels, the doctors and nurses of the SCI ward, the cherubim.

A few days before I wrote this piece the bass player from Aardvark came to visit me at my home. We played together. There's a chance I might actually perform at this year's Spring concert. What a testament to the VABHS in West Roxbury that would be.

Reflecting on Our Mission

The mission of our Spinal Cord injury Center is: “To promote the health, independence, quality of life, and productivity of individuals with spinal cord injuries and disorders throughout their lives.”

There are two things I like to emphasize when we talk about our mission statement. First, that its scope is much broader than the traditional view of health care (as also illustrated by the story above). Second, that this is a life-long commitment to the Veterans we serve in our SCI system of care, which is unique to the VA and differentiates us from even the highest-rated SCI programs in the private sector.
Why would a Veteran with SCI/D get up at dawn to perform daily activities in order to arrive at the SCI Clinic by 8AM? It must be time for an SCI Annual Evaluation! The Annual Evaluation is a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary visit that allows each Veteran to see the nurse practitioner, nurse, occupational and/or physical therapist, pharmacist, psychologist and social worker. The appointment may also include an abdominal ultrasound and lab work. If you think about it, the evaluation is actually the consolidation of seven appointments taking place in one trip to VABHS.

The yearly comprehensive evaluation includes assessment of changes in health status, function, and living situation, a physical examination, gait or wheelchair assessment (depending on level of injury), assessment of equipment and supplies, review of current medications, review of contact information for next-of-kin and emergency contacts, opportunity to create or change an Advance Medical Directive, assessment of care needs in the home with appropriate referrals as needed, and assessment of emotional or cognitive concerns. With each provider, the Veteran has the opportunity to ask questions, discuss care options and develop a plan for his/her health for the year.

The outpatient staff would like to remind you of the value of this appointment for your overall health and well-being. Attending medical appointments for preventative health care goes a long way towards preventing or nipping problems in the bud and reducing the number of emergent appointments related to illness, pressure ulcers and other medical crises. Therefore, we encourage you not to postpone your Annual Evaluation.

SCI Clinic contact number: 857-203-6458

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**Winter Sports Clinic 2015**

VA New England Adaptive Sports held its 18th Annual Winter Sports Clinic for Disabled Veterans in January. This was the largest clinic so far with 59 Veterans and 141 volunteers. The event was held in Sunapee, NH and was co-hosted by the VA Boston Healthcare System (VABHS) and New England Handicapped Sports Association (NEHSA). Many Veterans from the SCI Service enjoyed participating in sled hockey, skiing, snowboarding, wheelchair basketball, air rifle, kayaking, massage therapy and yoga. These activities provide physical rehabilitation, promote independence and offer relaxation and socialization.

Two of our VABHS Veterans with SCI received awards. Roland Filion won the award for Most Improved. Attending for his fourth year, Roland has mastered sit-skiing so that he can now enjoy more challenging trails with his brother Luc.

Brett Graveline, who attended for the first time, got an award for Most Dangerous! One of Brett’s runs brought him a little too close to snow-making equipment. Happily there were no injuries to Brett or the machine. Stay safe, Brett!

Staff from the West Roxbury SCI and Rehab Medicine Services participated as instructors, team leaders and administrators. Both Veterans and volunteers agree that this was a great week for learning, camaraderie and fun!

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**Benefits of the SCI Annual Evaluation**

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Staff Updates and Activities

SCI nursing staff has a new management structure. Bonnie Russell, RN, Nurse Manager of Unit A2 in West Roxbury, is now Nurse Manager for both A2 on the West Roxbury campus and Unit 81B (SCI long-term care) on the Brockton campus. Bonnie’s leadership of nursing staff in both units will further improve coordination and flow between the two campuses. Alicia Sullivan, RN is the new Assistant Manager for unit A2 and Maria Parks, RN is the new Assistant Manager for unit 81B. All three bring a wealth of SCI knowledge and experience to their new positions.

January 2015

Bonnie Russell, RN  Nurse manager  A2 and 81B
Alicia Sullivan, RN  Assistant Manager  A2, West Roxbury
Maria Parks, RN  Assistant Manager  81B, Brockton

February 2015

Nursing staff at both our SCI campuses are compassionate individuals who are dedicated to providing high quality care to the Veterans they serve. There are times when they push themselves a bit more and exceed even those high expectations. For this they have been recognized as Employees of the Month. Thank You and Congratulations to the winners.

Christine Azevedo, RN  A2, West Roxbury
Victoria Henshaw, NA  81B, Brockton

Sharing the Knowledge

Three members of the SCI team presented at the Harvard Medical School Center for Palliative Care at the Dana Farber Institute on Friday, January 9, 2015. Their presentation entitled: “I Prefer Not to Roll Over” provided attendees insights into best practices and unique considerations when someone with SCI develops serious medical illness such as advanced cancer.

Pictured Left to Right: Marika Hess, MD, Marybeth Butler, RN and Kysa Christie, PhD

Peace of Mind - With a Push of a Button

The Guardian Alert System is a two-way emergency communication device offered by VABHS to our Veterans with SCI/D. This is not only a 911 alert, but a device that permits talking directly to the operator with the push of a button.

During an emergency, you or your loved one would not need to remember a number or reach for a phone. Pushing the button on the pendant will activate a call over the phone line to a 911 operator and allow two way voice communication with the operator via the speaker on the pendant. The system includes a base station which plugs into a phone jack, a pendant which is worn by the user, a lanyard, and a belt clip. AAA battery and telephone landline are required.

If this system would be useful in your home, please contact the SCI Clinic at 857-203-6458 to request a consult be placed for the Guardian Alert System.
Our 2014 SCI strategic plan was organized under 5 Areas of Excellence, with priority objectives established for each area.

**I. Excellence in Population Health**
- **Priority Objective: Expand SCI Virtual Access and Telehealth**
  
  In Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, more than 100 Veterans with SCI used video telehealth to connect with the SCI team at Boston from home or other VAs. The number of SCI telehealth visits jumped from 21 in FY2012 to 325 in FY2014.

**II. Excellence in Patient Experience**
- **Priority Objective: Honor Veterans as Partners in Health Care**
  
  Over 85% of SCI staff completed training to enhance their knowledge, skills, and attitude to improve communication and health outcomes by better understanding what is truly important to each Veteran with SCI.

**III. Excellence in Financial Stewardship**
- **Priority Objective: Expand our Patient Base**
  
  We implemented a plan to systematically identify and address those lost to follow-up in our SCI System of Care.

**IV. Excellence in Workforce**
- **Priority Objective: Support Staff Satisfaction and Engagement.**

  A Systems Engineer joined the SCI team to enhance staff engagement & expertise in improving processes of care.

**V. Excellence in Service to Our Communities**
- **Priority Objective: Enhance SCI training.** We made several enhancements and grew our SCI training programs in 2014.