



FALLING BETWEEN THE CRACKS

Olegario (Ollie) is a delightful man in his 70's who emigrated from Chile 40 years ago. He is passionate about his adopted country and worked for many years as a storekeeper at one of our largest teaching hospitals. Ollie firmly believes that Australia has given him a good life, but his life has suddenly taken an unexpected turn.

In July of this year Ollie suffered a stroke which has left him in a world without words. Ollie has aphasia. His stroke interrupted the language processing centres of his brain which all spoken and written communication becomes difficult. Ollie is walking and looks fit and healthy – his disability is invisible – and yet it impacts on every waking hour.

Ollie received excellent inpatient care in a Sydney metropolitan hospital – but like many people with aphasia who are otherwise well he was keen to return home. Demands on services in his local area are such that he can expect to wait up to three months for services through the public health sector; three months of a bewildering new life where movement of thoughts into words is agonisingly slow and frustrating. Ollie was becoming increasingly withdrawn and his mood was suffering. He was saying less over time as his confidence decreased.

Ollie is fortunate indeed in having the support and advocacy of his devoted wife Sylvia. Sylvia trawled lists of private therapists to find

some options for Ollie while he was waiting for outpatient services. Ollie has no private health insurance.

It took Ollie six weeks to find a private clinician with specialist aphasia knowledge who was prepared to accept him under a medicare referral. At best the meagre Medicare rebates will contribute to five sessions per year – even more inadequate when National Stroke Guidelines suggest treatment requirements of upwards of 5 hours per week for people with Aphasia.

After a single assessment session Ollie and Sylvia left the clinic with a knowledge of aphasia and the likely recovery pathway. Ollie literally sat on the edge of his chair for his assessment – but as the session progressed he sat back, drew a big breath and announced “Good...good” Ollie’s clinician referred him to additional public sector waiting lists and offered an interim treatment plan.

Ollie’s secret weapon is of course, his wife. Within two treatment sessions Ollie and Sylvia are working on a customised home program. Sylvia and Ollie manage this amidst the daily realities of looking for a new house and the frustrations of Ollie suddenly being relegated to the passenger seat after years of being the family driver. Last week, after gentle pressure from his therapist, Ollie and his wife attended the launch of Aphasia NSW at the Stroke 2012 Conference – and viewed a newly released movie “Aphasia: Hope is a four letter word”. Ollie was warmly welcomed by members of his local Aphasia Support group. Ollie was able to have a slow and broken conversation with these men and conveyed “I did not want to come. I thought I was the only one”

The Centre for Clinical Research Excellence in Aphasia is working towards a more predictable pathway for people suffering from aphasia. In just two treatments Ollie has an understanding of his diagnosis, his family have learned more about aphasia and he has made the first steps towards joining a support group. These are all important factors in long term recovery.

After a third treatment Ollie identified some real-life goals. Ollie filled his car, paid for his petrol and had a short conversation with the attendant. Ollie has begun his aphasia journey.