

My Story

Jane Clarke

'No one need experience brain injury alone'

In 2001, Jane Clarke and her family were enjoying a family holiday in Orlando, Florida. One evening, Jane and her husband Stephen went out to enjoy a meal, leaving their two young children – Rebecca, aged eight, and six-year-old Ben – with Jane's mother, Joan, who had joined them on the holiday. Sadly, the supposedly romantic evening ended with Jane undergoing an operation to save her life.

"I remember feeling ill after we'd eaten," recalled Jane. "It was a strange sensation at first as there initially was no real pain, just a funny feeling in my temple. Strangely, even at that stage I knew I needed to see a doctor.

"I began to feel more and more nauseous and rushed outside to get some fresh air. Stephen joined me, noticing how quickly I was deteriorating. Apparently, I was beginning to jumble all my words. The pain then started and became unbearable very quickly. It was so bad that I couldn't stand up or even think straight.

"Stephen had called an ambulance and I recall hearing its sirens as it came closer. I was rushed to the nearest hospital, which was thankfully only a mile away. There, it was quickly established that I'd suffered a subarachnoid haemorrhage – or SAH for short. An aneurysm in my head, which I didn't know was there, had burst.

"They operated immediately to clip the aneurysm. For the next week, I was in a sleep/wake cycle in intensive care, occasionally making cohesive statements to my husband before falling back to sleep. I also remember hearing the doctors explain to Stephen that they 'didn't know what deficits I would have'. I knew that deficit was medical jargon for loss of ability or function. What did it mean for me? Would I still be able to be a mum to my kids? Look after our house? Return to work? Speak French?

"It must have been so hard for the children as they were so young. They had been told that mummy might die and had to see me in hospital with a huge scar on my head from the craniotomy and feeding tubes all over the place. I can't imagine what Stephen had to live through

"After a week in intensive care, I was moved to another ward before finally leaving hospital after three weeks. My mum had taken the children home by that point, while Stephen and I had to wait another week until it was safe for me to fly.

"When we did get back, I was faced with a huge amount of uncertainty. I worked in Clinical Research, leading a large team of people based in Europe, US and Japan; would I still be able to do it? At first, the answer was no. The first few weeks were so tough. I was so fatigued that even having breakfast would mean I needed a nap.

"My concentration and memory were also very poor, so much so that I couldn't even watch a television programme because I wouldn't be able to remember the plot or characters. I could only read short stories.

“Gradually, I began to make progress. We were very lucky in that both my employers and Stephen’s were very understanding.

“But it was tough – particularly as we didn’t have any information or support. We hadn’t heard of Headway and received no information from my GP.

“After about 8 weeks I returned to work, and it went well. I continued to get promoted and have greater responsibilities and success in my job. I feel fortunate in that I haven’t been left with any significant cognitive deficits although I will always worry about the effect it has had on my family.

“Four years ago, I noticed an advert in my local paper. It said that a charity called Headway South Bucks, which helps local people affected by brain injury, was looking for trustees to join its board.

“I did some research on Headway and immediately realised that this was a charity providing help that would have been of so much value to me and my family had we known about it.

“I registered my interest in becoming a trustee and was accepted onto the board. My reasoning was simple: I wanted to do all I could to spread the word and ensure more people affected by brain injury were aware that help is out there. Whether they need information, support or help to relearn lost skills, I wanted people to know that Headway was there for them and their families.

“Two years ago, I was elected Chair of Headway South Bucks. It’s a role I am honoured to fulfil and I am proud to be a part of a charity that makes such a difference to people’s lives.”