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A god or a quad: time to tell the whole truth about spinal cord injuries

By Corey Hague

The difference between a feel good story and depression can be as simple as the facts. Especially when it comes to spinal cord injuries.

When Paul Mariager flicked the television over to channel Nine on Sunday night to watch the *60 Minutes* story about Curtis Landers, it brought with it some extremely strong emotions.

As a c5-6 quadriplegic himself, he couldn't help feeling that his determination was being questioned.

"It hurt. I didn't *not* recover due to a deficiency of desire. Immediately after the accident all I wanted to do was recover. You pray and hope 24/7. All of your waking hours are about recovery. That I didn't was due to the damage done to my spinal cord," he says.

The television story echoed elements of Paul's life - as a teen, a BMX accident left him in the hospital, with doctors telling him he'd never walk again.

Similarly, Curtis was a teenage rugby player who dislocated his spine in a tackle. Luckily for Curtis, his family and his teammates, by the end of the emotional television segment, he'd defiantly walked from his wheelchair and cast off his uncomfortable neck brace.

The key difference between the two of course, is that Paul is still in a wheelchair, still a quadriplegic, still unable to walk, sixteen years after his accident.

Paul says that stories of 'miraculous' recoveries in the media aren't productive to fostering an understanding of spinal injuries, and places the focus on the wrong aspects of the post-accident process.

"It makes out that walking is a panacea for happiness. It's everything. It's treated like an option, as though if you don't recover you don't have will power. It's unfair, it's untrue and it's dangerous. These kind of hero worship stories make out that you're either a god, or you're a quad."

The truth of the issue is more subtle and revolves around the inescapable reality of the injury that someone suffers.

Curtis Landers rugby injury was no doubt horrific, but the crucial difference is that he dislocated his spine, rather than sever it. It mightn't sound like much of a disparity, but the potential outcomes are vastly different.

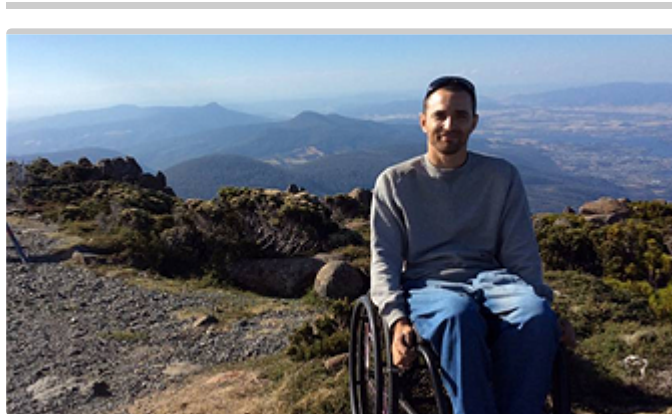
"There was critical information not given, or not given correctly. Even if the correct information was presented, it still would've been a great story. It didn't have to be presented the way it was, where people like myself take offence and take hurt. It adds to the frustration."

Paul is quick to point out that his frustration is not with Curtis and his rehabilitation, rather the specificity around how the media treats spinal injury information.

"The people in charge of the show seem to feel that spinal cord injury is a topic with wiggle room for facts and details. I'm really happy for Curtis; I wish that no one was ever in a wheelchair. But the subject was manipulated to suit the story."

These days Paul has finished his university degree, works full time, lives in his own apartment and volunteers with rehabilitation centres and education organisations, **speaking to school groups about spinal damage**. But don't dare call him an inspiration.

"The way I see spinal cord injury is that its part loss, part hardship, part change and part challenge. They're things that everyone on earth goes through. It's obvious I'm in a wheelchair, but that doesn't mean I'm hard done by. Everyone has a story to tell. But how the story is told is important."



Everyone has a story, says Paul Mariager.
(Supplied - Supplied)

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