

Simple accident leads to life of pain



Research and resources are desperately needed to ensure that fewer chronic pain patients are told to “go home and live with it”.

Soula Mantalvanos was working in her graphic design studio seven years ago when the fitness ball (also known as a balance ball or exercise ball) she was sitting on in place of a chair unexpectedly burst beneath her. Ms Mantalvanos fell from a seated position onto the concrete floor, her sacropelvic region bearing the full force of the blunt fall.

Her husband Theo ran to her side. After the shock settled, she crawled to the carpeted area and her response was to laugh. The pair “had a good old laugh actually – it was such a silly accident,” she remembers.

That unexpected and seemingly innocuous accident would determine the course of the rest of her life. Ms Mantalvanos expected to feel sore but better after a couple of days. But the pain continued, intensified and from that moment shaped her days, her nights, her relationships and her ability to work.

It took nearly five years of chasing answers, of tests and interventions, frustration, grief, and constant, unbearable pain to reach a diagnosis. The fall caused nerve damage in the pelvic area, very real but invisible on MRIs, examinations, X-rays and CT scans.

The diagnosis of pudendal neuralgia, arrived at after four and a half years, was the start of finding more effective treatment for her pain. Today, two and a half years after the diagnosis, Ms Mantalvanos’s pain is better managed and she uses an electronic implant, which distracts signals of pain to her brain. She has also become a strong advocate for better recognition, treatment and management of chronic pain.

One in five people across Australia and New Zealand suffer from chronic pain, yet the condition remains little understood.

This message was the theme of the ANZCA Anaesthesia and Pain Medicine Foundation’s “1 in 5” television campaign launched in July to spread awareness of chronic pain. The commercial can be seen at www.anzca.edu.au/fellows/foundation.

Ms Mantalvanos is one of the chronic pain patients who volunteered their services to appear in the commercial, which encourages the public to donate to research into chronic pain.

The Dean of ANZCA’s Faculty of Pain Medicine, Professor Ted Shipton, said chronic pain had many causes and was a complex and debilitating condition that desperately needed more research.

“We need to keep finding better treatments and develop better understanding of the mechanisms at work in this condition – and for that we need more dedicated research.”

Ms Mantalvanos agrees. She is also the subject of a short film, *The Hurting Strings*, which documents the effect chronic pain has had on her life (see www.pudendalnerve.com.au). She hopes the film and the television commercial will raise the profile of chronic pain in the community. She is also working with pain professionals in WA to produce a pain management program.

“It is still a primitive time in pain. Being told for four and a half years ‘this is chronic pain ... go home and live with it, there’s nothing that can be done’ is brutal not to mention primitive.”

Ebru Yaman
ANZCA Media Manger

Clockwise from left: Soula Mantalvanos in her studio; a still from the television campaign; self-portrait: Finalist in The Doug Moran Portrait Painting Prize 2014.