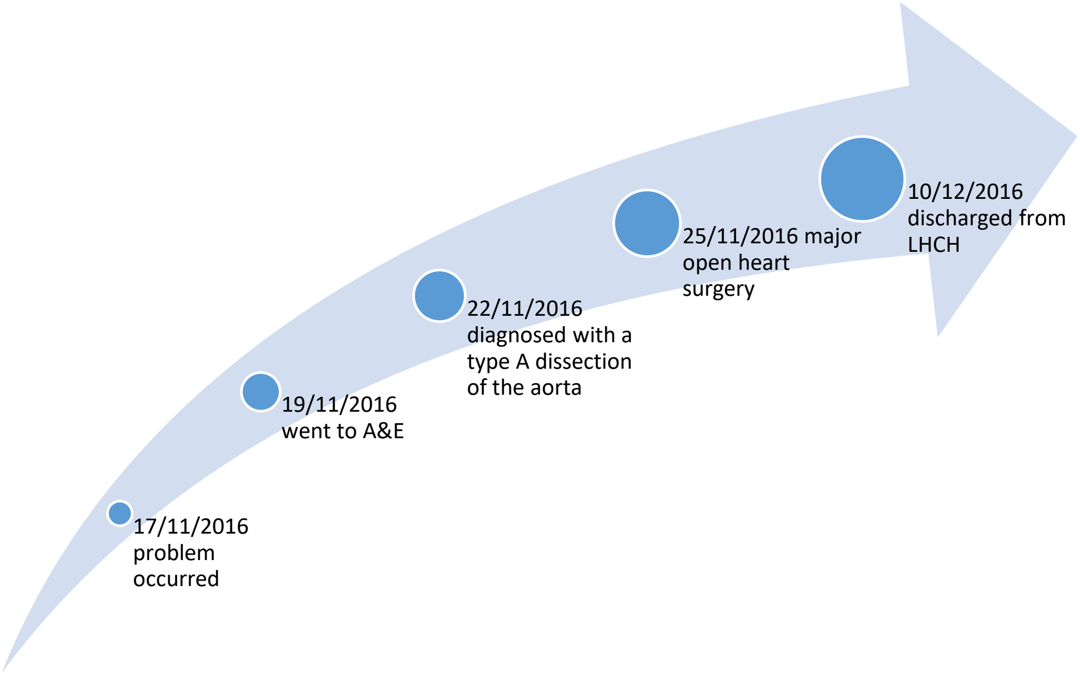
The Heartache and the Madness

Introduction

On November 17th, 2016 I fell ill with a serious heart condition that required open heart surgery and long road to recovery after. The following pages describe what happened to me in more detail and are written from my own perspective with the missing gaps filled in mainly by what my dear wife, Sophie, told me afterwards. I have focussed on my time in hospital, but also touch on my further recovery at home.

The reason for writing it all down is mainly to have an account of what happened for myself and my family and everyone else who took an interest and had some kind of involvement in my predicament and subsequent recovery.

Timeline



The above is a very simple timeline of what has happened to me and when – only a few pivotal points. A more detailed timeline summary is below:

17/11/2016 – problem occurred

18/11/2016 – went to work

19/11/2016 – went to A&E, was later transferred to Intensive care isolation room

21/11/2016 – cardiologist found heart murmur, Doppler, CT scan, suspected problem with heart valve

22/11/2016 – swallowed camera, type A dissection diagnosed, sedated and transferred to Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital (LHCH), found too ill to operate on, potential chest infection

23/11/2016 – Sophie and Norma came to visit, no recollection

24/11/2016 – Mabzi came to visit and I remember him saying “Sophie says she loves you very much” and also “we’ll have to go for a curry and a beer when you’re better”

25/11/2016 – 10-12 hour operation to repair the type A dissection of the aorta and an aortic valve replacement

26/11/2016 – Sophie, my mum, Catherine and Jessica came to visit, no recollection. Teresa, Kaye and Charlie came to visit, no recollection.

27/11/2016 – Sophie, my mum and Jessica came to visit and I remember it all, but was unable to communicate. Remembering conversations and what Sophie said to the nurse.

28/11/2016 – Hazy memories of Sophie phoning and the nurse putting her on speaker. I tried to shout a “hello Sophie” from underneath my oxygen mask, but she only heard a muffled groan. Constant urge to do something special to survive, but it just wasn’t working.

29/11/2016 – I found my ability to speak and I regained some memories… very rudimentary memories. The nurse offered me to phone Sophie. I did and was excited to tell her about my memories. Sophie was excited about my ability to speak. Phoned later again to speak to Sophie, Jessica, my mum and Catherine. Emotional times!

30/11/2016 – first steps with a Zimmer frame

1/12/2016 – Sophie and my mum came to visit, I was very enthusiastic that day. First cups of coffee. Later transferred to the Cedar Ward.

5/12/2016 – collapsed whilst on a walk with physio staff

6/12/2016 – couldn’t be discharged, as CT scan found a pulmonary embolism. On Warfarin.

9/12/2016 – couldn’t be discharged due to a second collapse

10/12/2016 – discharged and went home in a black cab, embarking on a long road to recovery.

A Problem Occurred

I took a couple of days off work in November 2016 to finish off some work on the landing and in the fourth bedroom that was to become our guest room and study. My friend Mike was helping me get everything ready for the plasterer, who was due to start a few days later.

On Thursday, 17th November 2016 – the second of those two days –I was doing some rewiring work up in the loft above the study. I probably spent around 3 hours going up and down the ladder and squeezing through the tight gaps between the beams up in the loft.

The plasterer was expected on Monday, 21st November 2016, and the pressure was on to get everything done in time. I knew I would be able to leave anything for the weekend, as we had planned to travel to Chapel-en-le-Frith on Saturday for Sophie’s Mum’s 70th birthday celebrations.

Although the loft was very dusty – as lofts always are – I didn’t wear a dust mask, which would have been the right thing to do, but who ever does.

All of a sudden I had a burning sensation at the back of my throat and at the same time breathing became really painful. I was unable to breathe in deeply.

I felt quite ill. I took half an hour rest, then went for a shower and got a migraine with aura whilst I was in the shower. This wasn't particularly unusual in itself as I have been suffering from these migraines since I was a teenager.

I asked Mike to take me to the dentist for my appointment that afternoon, as I was unable to see clearly due to the migraine.

Sophie, my wife, was already at the dentist. After the check-up, Sophie suggested to take me to A&E, but I declined, as I needed to go into work the next day.

The same suggestion was repeated and declined again in the morning.

I went to work on Friday, 18th November, to spend 8 hours there, struggling to walk and talk when getting a coffee. I was feeling breathless and really unwell.

When I came home, Sophie asked me again if I wanted her to take me to A&E and I declined again.

I slept for 4 hours that evening and then watched telly, went to bed late, but woke up at 4am in pain, turning my body in bed hurt, my whole chest hurt, breathing hurt, unable to go back to sleep.

Off to A&E

Sophie woke up at 6am and suggested again to take me to A&E. I declined again, but she persuaded me to phone NHS Wales Direct. Following a 20-minute phone interview, I was told to let my wife take me to A&E ASAP and not to drive myself.

We arrived at the Wrexham Maelor A&E about 7am and I saw the triage nurse after just a few minutes. She quickly established that my blood oxygen saturation was critically low at 84. I asked:

> "What is it meant to be?"
>
> "It should be 100 or at least 95-100, below 92 is critical", she replied.

Later on I learned that 84 was considered life-threatening.

Before I knew it, I was in a treatment room with an oxygen mask, wondering what was happening. Lots of different nurses and doctors looked at me, taking my blood pressure, listening to my chest, etc.

Sophie left after a couple of hours. She had to prepare for her Mum's 70th birthday meal that evening.

Later in the day, the intensive care guys came to assess my situation and after 13 hours on a stretcher in A&E they moved me to an isolation room in the intensive care unit, as they were also testing me for various types of flu (bird flu, swine flu, maybe even man flu).

Wrexham Maelor Intensive Care Unit – Isolation room

I was on 10l/min oxygen and had about four drips in my arm, as they weren't sure what was wrong with me. I had venal cannulas and also an arterial cannula to keep regular checks on my blood oxygen levels as well as constantly checking my blood pressure.

The one thing I really, really didn't want was a catheter. I decided to do my wees in one of those carton bottles they give you.

Listened to Fortuna beating St Pauli away on the internet radio on the Sunday. Despite all, I was in good spirits.

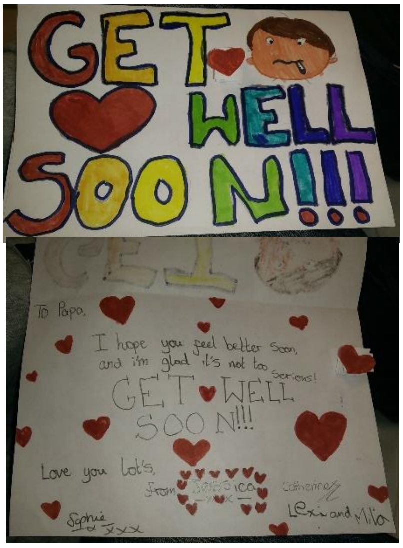
Sister Sarah and other nurses kept telling me that I don't know how poorly I really am, but they still don't know what's wrong with me.

I tried to be positive at all times. Since I knew that I was pretty ill, I didn't want to waste my time being negative. I was probably much more positive than I normally am.

Sophie and Mike came to see me… and the girls brought me a wonderful "get well soon" card, which they made themselves and I was gutted when I later spilled some water over it and spoiled it, but at least I took a photo of it before.

On Monday, someone came to listen to my heart again and detected a murmur. I think this was the anaesthetist Dr Southern.

Someone else came and put a Doppler on, so I could hear it myself.



GET WELL SOON!!!

To Papa,

I hope you feel better Soon, and i'm glad it's not too Serious!

GET WELL SOON!!!

Love you lot's,

From Jessica xxx

Sophie xxx

Catherine

Lexi and Mila

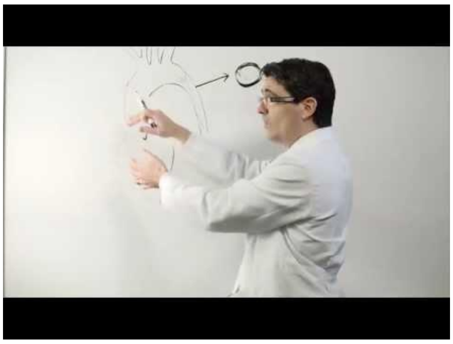
I was sent for a CT scan which seemed to come back with a heart valve issue, but to be certain, I had to swallow a camera the next morning.

Tuesday morning, I swallowed the camera and they diagnosed a type A dissection of the aorta (see embedded 3-minute video). I was told that I urgently needed a heart operation and had to be sedated and transferred to Liverpool!

I knew that I would be out of it for a few days, maybe a week or even longer. I had already phoned my mum on Monday night, before I knew the exact details just to tell her that I would not be phoning for a little while.

I proceeded to transfer some money to Sophie's account to cover upcoming costs to do with the house (plasterer, built-in wardrobe) and Christmas.

I have no memory of this but I was told afterwards by Sophie that I had suggested I could drive myself. However, this was out of the question. I had to be sedated before transport for my own safety.



Sophie, Catherine and Jessica waved me good bye.

The lights went out.

Needless to say, at that stage they also fitted a catheter without my knowledge.

The Dark Pre-Op Days

On arrival at the Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital (LHCH) POCCO (critical care) unit, I must have been hooked up to all sorts of machines taking over my heart and lungs. I was out of it.

I only have one memory of what they were doing to me. I believe they deliberately woke me up enough to install a feeding tube. I can't remember who it was, but I think it was a doctor with a beard who came into my vision all of a sudden. It was a dream-like scene. The room around him appeared wavy and fluid – almost like it is shown in some sort of Hollywood blockbuster when they want to indicate that what you are about to see is just a dream.

The doctor's face appeared close to mine. He introduced himself and then apologised for what he was about to do to me. He needed my help, as he was going to put this tube up my nose and into my stomach and this would be used to feed me. He didn't want me to gag, but just swallow the strange object that entered my body through my left nostril. This was pretty horrible, but as soon as it was in, the lights went out again.

I believe they took an x-ray to see if this particular undertaking had been successful and I remember the doctor waking me up again to apologise once more and tell me that he had to half pull it out again and reintroduce it as it wasn't quite in the right place. Oh joy.

I seem to remember saying "oh that sounds great", or "go on, sounds fun" in a bit of a sarcastic manner, but with hindsight, I'm pretty sure these were only my thoughts and I was unable to speak. I can't be sure about this.

Sophie and her Mum came to visit on the Wednesday and I have no recollection.

My dear work friend, Paul (aka Mabzi), came to visit on the Thursday and most amazingly, I can recall hearing his voice and him saying "Sophie says she loves you very much" and he then went on to say that we will go for a curry and a beer when I'm better.

It's just as well that I have no memory of the Friday since I underwent a 10-12 hour operation on that day. I'm not sure if I was aware at that stage that my Mum was on her way over from Germany to visit me. I was transferred from the operating theatre to the post-operative critical care unit (or POCCU).

Recovery on the Brink of Madness

On Saturday, Sophie visited with Catherine, Jessica and my Mum. I have no recollection.

Also on Saturday, Kay, Teresa and Charlie came to visit. Kay and Teresa came in first and then Charlie on his own afterwards. I was later told that I indecently exposed myself to Kay and Teresa…

however, I have no memory of this. It would appear that I was a bit more awake when Kay and Teresa were in the room than at the other times, but still no memory.

When I started drifting in and out of consciousness, I didn't know if I was dead or alive. I looked at my hands with my swollen sausage fingers and I looked at the four clear tubes that were sticking out of my belly with some strange liquid sloshing around. I was trying to make sense of it all but I couldn't.

My initial perception is that everything's fake – the building, the computers, even the visitors (I am sure they were pre-recorded holograms).

I also feel that every time I wake up I'm in a different room. I don't understand why it still says "Room 10" on my room door, which was open most of the time. I was convinced I was always in a different room when I woke up again. I think I clung onto these beliefs for several days.

All I could see was that I was in a bed, attached to machines. Straight in front of me was a double window with horizontal blinds that I was able to look through most of the time. The frame dividing the two windows was used to pin cards to that people had brought. I remember there being only one card, the one with balloons on that I much later found out was from Kay, Clive, Teresa and Charlie and their families.

On Sunday, Sophie came to visit me again with Jessica and my mum. I had my eyes open, but I was later told that I didn't react to anything that was said to me. I could have sworn I answered back, or nodded or shook my head at least, but that just happened in my imagination.

However, I remember Jessica holding and stroking my hand and the kind words she found for me, as well as Sophie's and my mum's words. I remember Sophie asking the nurse if she could pin up a card with a photo of Sophie and me that was taken on Sophie's 40th birthday and it also had two school photos of Catherine and Jessica underneath. The nurse obliged and pinned the card up underneath the balloon card.

Before they left, I remember Sophie promising me that she would come again on Thursday with my Mum. From that moment on, I was waiting for Thursday.

I also remember feeling annoyed at them sedating me so heavily at times, making me unconscious when I had visitors. So I must have been aware of visitors being around even though I was out of it and unable to communicate. It was so strange.

In the next few days I kept staring at the photos. They meant so much to me and they were my constant reminder that I *had* to survive to look after my family. I sometimes got very emotional in the process.

Is it not Thursday yet?

No, it was only Monday and Sophie phoned the room and the nurse put her on speakerphone. I heard Sophie shouting my name down the line and I tried to say 'hello' from behind the oxygen mask. She only heard a mumbled groan, but it was 100 times better than the non-communication of the previous day.

Whilst I was being fed through my nose and the liquids went straight into my blood stream through one of the many cannulas they equipped me with, I could have killed for a sip of water, but that was not allowed.

Nurses wetting my lips with a sponge brought some very short-lived relief – oh so thirsty.

I had dreams at times. At some point I dreamed that I was in a different room that had this glass section at the back – almost like a mini conservatory – and it backed onto an artificial lake with a wooden jetty going across it just above the surface of the water. I had walked across there to get to this room. I had the distinct feeling that I had been to the other side of the lake. I don't know why, when or what had happened to me there, but I knew I had been there. Really strange.

Oh, surely, it must be Thursday by now.

I also remember that at some point I said to the nurse that I needed the toilet for a number 1. The nurse told me that I had a catheter and didn't need to worry about that. Somehow I constantly needed a wee, though, but I learned to ignore the urge.

Maybe later the same day or the next – time had no meaning to me anymore – I was allowed to take 2-3 small sips of water through a straw. I'm sure it wasn't a normal straw as it was so hard to get anything out of it… or maybe it was just a case of me being so weak and unable to suck a bit harder.

At some point the nurse pulled out my electric toothbrush and suggested I could brush my teeth, but there was no toothpaste. She sent someone to the shop to get some toothpaste for me.

They really looked after me extremely well. Their equipment may be fake and the whole building might just be some sort of pressurised inflatable, but I was always convinced that I was in the best place and I was very well looked after.

I woke up and went to sleep so many times, it must be Thursday, surely, or maybe Sophie said she would come and see me *a week on Thursday*? Not sure…

I understood that Sophie had to carry on working at this busy time of year, but I was missing her so much.

The level of care was fantastic and the drugs were not too shoddy either, as I cannot remember ever feeling any pain. Considering that they had broken my breast bone and opened the bonnet, that is quite remarkable, really.

There is one exception to this. They came and changed my bed sheets daily and when they told me to cross my arms in front of my chest and roll to one side, I was in all sorts of pain in my chest. It was truly horrible.

And then there was the emotional hurt… they made me wear these Errol Flynn stockings that were really tight and way too hot, but apparently they preferred me in them. Sexy? Not!

When they got rid of some drainage tubes from my belly, they told me to take a really deep breath and blow, blow, blow out all the candles on an imaginary, massive birthday cake in front of me. This was needed to avoid having some air trapped in the wrong places. I didn't understand it, I just went with it.

Thursday? Nah, not yet, it's only Tuesday, the nurse tells me. Sigh.

A Pivotal Moment

Tuesday, 29th November, marked a turning point. Admittedly, it still wasn't Thursday – and I checked at least twice with the nurse that day – but it was a turning point for a number of reasons. Tuesday marks the first day that I had really rediscovered my ability to speak. I had another visitor and I had a couple of fantastic conversations on the phone.

My friend Clive came to see me that day. I think I had been told by Sophie that Clive would come and see me, but I was still surprised to see him.

Clive arrived just shortly after the nurses and physio staff encouraged me to get out of bed and sit in a chair for a while. What an effort that was! Just to stand up for a few seconds and push my knees through then shuffle a 90-degree turn to then place my backside on that big armchair on wheels that they had brought in. The effort to sit up and support my own body weight in that way was immense. It was exhausting!

Clive arrived and sat down next to me and kept talking to me. I think my speech was still a bit slurred and I had been a bit emotional looking at the photos in the middle of the two windows in front. I remember before Clive arrived I had been quietly chanting my family's names: I kept whispering:

Sophie, Catherine, Jessica, Mutti

Sophie, Catherine, Jessica, Mutti

Sophie, Catherine, Jessica, Mutti

…

I had Nurse Annabel looking after me that day and at some point Annabel said "what are doing? What are you saying?"

"I'm just saying my loved ones' names", I replied. It helped me focus on my survival.

When Clive came I was still a bit emotional from this, but I was somehow embarrassed about it, too. Clive found good words like "promise me, you never give up" and "you're going to get through this, I know it", all really positive things and they helped me a lot.

Clive stayed for quite a while and whilst I was really appreciative of the visit and welcomed the distraction, it had occurred at maybe not the best moment for me.

At some point, Clive tried to check something on the internet on his phone, but he said there was no signal in the building. I thought:

Yes, of course you don't get a signal, because you have been pre-recorded and you're just a hologram and you wouldn't be able to check something live on the internet. They won't allow that to happen.

I didn't say anything, just in case my suspicions sounded a bit crazy…

I did make a remark to Annabel that day stating that the whole place was not real or something along those lines. Annabel appeared rather offended: "what do you mean this is all not real?"

I let it go, I didn't want to offend her any further. I just thought:

OK, you play your game, I play mine

Never mind how much I doubted the reality of this place, I still believed that whatever they did, it was to ensure that I would recover and I was in the best place. If that involved putting me into a pressurised inflatable room in a pressurised inflatable fake hospital with fake equipment, so be it.

I'm sure, Annabel noted down on her paperwork that her patient was still delusional.

The pivotal moment, however, was preceded by a personal, emotional crisis. I kept looking at the photo of Sophie and myself as well as the photos of Catherine and Jessica and I tried so hard to survive, always feeling that I had to do something special to survive.

I was going through these endless cycles of I don't know what, but I seemed to hear this whirring sound above my head from one of the machines. There were these big arms mounted to the ceiling above my head and whilst they weren't moving I could hear this whirring sound gradually winding up to a higher and higher pitched sound. I suspected this happened inside these arms, but I had no evidence to support this. I was sure it had something to do with radio-activity or something similar.

My problem was that I felt that I had to sit through this whirring sound until it reached its climax and if I did everything right, at that point, I would survive. That's how my drug-fuelled and maybe oxygen-starved brain interpreted the situation.

My brain also gave me a very clear vision of what would happen if I did survive. Something, utterly ridiculous to anyone who hasn't lost their marbles, I know. Remember in the olden days when new-born babies were kept in a separate room on the maternity ward? Away from their mothers? And when the family came to visit a nurse would hold the baby up against a window and the family would be able to look at the baby from the other side?

Well, I was convinced I was on this strange bed – that by the way kept moving as it had some sort of airflow inside it – a bed that would function like a pilot's ejector seat and at that moment when I finally do everything right and the whirring sound comes to a climax and I have turned that corner and finally survived, the ejector bed would catapult me forwards and pin me against the window. The horizontal blinds would change and I would see my emotional family standing behind the window applauding and cheering my survival. There would also be some sort of fanfare playing similar to a fanfare at an American baseball game.

I was slightly concerned that I was completely naked under that thin sheet and if I did get catapulted into an upright position that sheet would drop down and I would be completely exposed. Didn't feel all that comfortable with that notion.

Believe it or not, but that crucial moment never happened. Instead another crucial moment happened, because I got so upset that I never managed to achieve this dramatic survival. I cried and cried and the lunchtime nurse – Annabel was on her lunch break – came to my bed and put her arm around my shoulders and asked what was wrong:

"Why are you so upset?"

"Oh, it's just not working. I've tried and tried and it's just not working. It's useless. Please just turn off the machines and let me die", I replied.

The nurse was really surprised at this, but somehow found exactly the right words:

"You don't need to do anything special. You are getting better every day. You've made huge improvements already. You're going to live! You have a family to look after and you will definitely be around to do just that. Don't ever say this again", she said, or something along those lines.

Somehow this was all that I needed. A reality check. Something to get me back on track. I think my reaction was something like "Oh really? OK, that's good. Please forget what I just said." I was instantly consoled and back to my positive attitude. My optimism had returned.

Not only had I found my speech that day and rediscovered my optimism, but I also suddenly remembered a few key points why I was where I was:

1) Sophie had taken me to A&E at the Wrexham Maelor
2) A cardiologist had shown me a picture of a heart and explained that I needed open heart surgery in Liverpool
3) I was now at the Liverpool Heart and Chest hospital following that major operation.

My memory was clearly rudimentary, as the above was all I could remember. I didn't realise that there had been 3 days between point 1 and point 2 and another 3 days between point 2 and point 3. To my mind, these 3 memories happened maybe over 2 or 3 days.

One nurse – not sure which one it was – at some point said:

"Anytime you want to phone your family, just let me know, I'll dial the number and pass you the receiver."

I immediately said:

"Yes, please, could you phone my wife's mobile please?" It was some time in the afternoon. I assumed, Sophie was still out and about, working.

The nurse obliged and Sophie answered the phone.

"Sophie, Sophie, I remember what happened. You took me to A&E, then they showed me a picture of a heart, and now I'm in Liverpool having had heart surgery", I blurted out.

"Yes, I know all this, but...", Sophie started.

I cut her off: "Yes, I know you know, but *I* know!"

Sophie didn't quite develop as much enthusiasm about my regained memories, as I did. Her excitement was driven by the fact that I was able to speak!

"Phone us again later at home and you can speak to the girls and your mum", she suggested.

Later on, it was a rather emotional conversation as I was able to tell my girls that I was on the road to recovery and – all being well – I would be home in time for Christmas. I was over the hump.

I was also able to chat with my mum and ask her when she came over, etc, and I chatted to Sophie again. It was simply wonderful. We were all very happy.

The physical and emotional development that day had been fantastic. I don't think I was so terribly aware of that at the time, but with hindsight, every day harboured major improvements for me during this period.

Baby's First Steps

On Wednesday, 30th November, I made further improvements. The physios came and said "let's go for a walk". I was unsure if I would be able to do this, but I certainly wanted to do this.

With the help of a Zimmer frame and four people around me, I got out of bed and took my very, very slow first steps. The instruction was to stand straight and look ahead, not down.

"If you're looking down, you're going down", someone said.

I lifted the Zimmer frame up and moved it on by a few inches and then I took two very small steps to catch up with it.

Two male physios – one either side of me – ready to grab my arms and support me should my knees give way. Another physio pulling the oxygen tank behind me and yet another one pushing a chair behind me in case I needed to sit down suddenly.

I managed to walk about 12 or 15 metres, before I felt a bit dizzy and needed to sit down. The physio ladies then pushed me out the back door to get a breath of fresh air. It was very cold outside, but so nice to see the real world.

Back in my room, I had a visit from a speech therapist and she suggested I should try some solid food.

“Let’s maybe try you with a banana and a yoghurt”, she said.

Annabel was my nurse again for the day and when I took that first tiny bite of that banana, my taste buds were having a field day. This was the best banana I had ever tried. I’m sure it wasn’t, but it was. I was grinning like a Cheshire cat and Annabel and the speech therapist were highly amused and enjoying the fact that I was so enthusiastic about that banana. It wasn’t even a particularly ripe one.

I also had a similar taste sensation with that Müller thick & creamy yoghurt that came next.

I had been following MasterChef – The Professionals for the last couple of days on that little telly that was mounted just above the double window. I saw some juicy rare steaks on that programme and I told them that I would rather have one of those. The speech therapist told me that I would have to wait a little while before I could tuck into a steak.

It’s quite a shock to think of the impact this operation has had on me. I felt like a baby having to learn how to walk and how to swallow food again.

All of a sudden Annabel said, “You have a visitor – can you tell who it is?”

I saw the silhouette of a man with grey hair through the horizontal window blinds. I had no idea.

When my colleague and friend, Adam, came through the door, I recognised him instantly.

He sat down next to me and we had a long conversation. I remember him asking me, if I knew how Fortuna Düsseldorf had gotten on at the weekend. I said “no”.

Adam tried to get the result from his phone, but once again, no data signal.

I thought: *surprise, surprise – well, don’t we know why that is…*

My own conspiracy theory that this whole place was fake and my visitors were holograms was fuelled again.

Whilst Adam was still there, I was expecting two more visitors, ie Sophie’s sister Becky and John Williams, a cousin of Sophie’s mum and a retired doctor who had worked at Liverpool Heart and Chest in his time.

I remember confessing to Becky and John that I thought the whole place was fake. I just couldn’t get my head around that doctors would come in, pushing tables with wireless PCs around and they never showed me the double screens from the front, so I was sure they didn’t even work. Besides, I had never even heard of wireless PCs before.

But, to be fair all these fake perceptions were busted one by one and by Thursday, I think I lost all my doubtful suspicions and accepted that I had been wrong.

I was still struggling to interpret the time. I couldn't tell if the clock read 20 past 5 or 20 to 7. A digital 24 hour clock would have been much more helpful. And the weekday and date would have been, too.

Finally Thursday

Finally, it was Thursday. Annabel was off that day. Instead, I had a really friendly Spanish nurse called Luis. I kept chatting to him most of the day.

I started the day with a cup of coffee, the first one in what seemed to be many weeks.

I wanted to see if I could write, so I asked Luis if he could get me a pen and a piece of paper to write down a few lines. I felt like I had been reborn that day. The delusions had lifted, I started to believe that the building, the equipment and even my visitors were real, and so I wrote something along the lines of:

Today is December 1st, 2016, and I feel like I have been reborn!

I wrote a few more lines, but unfortunately I have lost the piece of paper and I cannot remember what else I wrote.

Eventually it got to lunchtime and Sophie and my mum turned up. I had been looking forward to this visit so much. I wasn't just positive, I was mega-enthusiastic.

I had my second cup of coffee with Sophie and my Mum. It was almost like a celebratory glass of champagne. We chatted and chatted and I nearly drove them away by passing wind.

Went for another walk, this time just with 4 staff and no Zimmer frame. Sophie and my mum following my very slow steps, but I walked more than twice the distance compared to the previous day. It must have been quite a shock for Sophie and my mum to see me walking so slowly needing four people around me, but to me it was a major achievement.

Sophie took a photo of me.

That day I truly felt for the first time that I would definitely get back to normal again.

The Cedar Ward

Later that Thursday night I was transferred to the Cedar ward.

I went to sleep quite early on after an exhausting day and woke up soon after thinking it was mid-day the next day. I got up and walked around to the nurses' desk to ask for my phone, but I couldn't have it as it was the middle of the night. But hey, all of a sudden I was walking around unaided! What a difference to just a few hours earlier when I was still in the critical care unit.

There were 4 beds in the room. Neil and Peter were there when I arrived and we were joined by Ryan soon after.

Neil was discharged on Saturday and replaced by another friendly guy. I think he was called Ian.

Peter was very working class, had a huge family and many visitors all the time. He also had a habit of soiling himself or waking up in the middle of the night swearing loudly.

Ryan was depressed about the fact that he had been hit by a heart attack. He is a landscape gardener and never smoked, only a moderate drinker, so he couldn’t get his head around why he had had a heart attack.

Neil was very posh, from Chester, within the city walls. Very nice guy. His son was also very posh and claimed that he pulled a muscle whilst he was attempting to moor the boat. First world problems, eh?

The food was great and getting better as I was moved off soft food and onto more solid stuff. The best meal was a steamed salmon fillet with béchamel sauce, new potatoes and green beans. The beef lasagne was another highlight on another day.

Breakfast consisted of toast, cereal or – if we were lucky – porridge. The porridge was great! Lunch was normally a choice of sandwich or salad and you could have a soup to start with.

Dessert options for lunch and dinner always included jelly and ice-cream, yoghurts, fruit, rice puddings, etc.

I really enjoyed the food much more than I would have ever expected and we also got plenty of teas and coffees offered several times a day.

The staff were great. I kept telling them every day and I think they enjoyed looking after me, because we always had a nice, friendly conversation.

I remember Nurse Ben, who was a bit nerdy, but a lovely guy. I got on really well with him.

Then there was student Nurse Tobias, who was very scouse, but also very keen to practice his knowledge of German.

When I went for my first shower – can’t remember if it was Friday or Saturday – it was such a huge effort. I needed Tobias to help me.

I had so many cards, so many visitors (but not as many or as often as Pete).

Friday, 2nd December: Sophie and Nichola came, but they had a horrendous journey there and couldn’t stay very long.

Saturday, 3rd December, Teresa and Charlie came first and later on Sophie came with Catherine and Jessica, Sarah and Ian. It was so fantastic to see my girls for the first time since I was fully conscious and to tell them that I would definitely be home before Christmas. It was the greatest moment for me. Just after they had left, Doctor John turned up again to see how I was getting on. It was such a shame that he had just missed the family.

Sunday, 4th December, Sophie’s mum came with Sophie’s sisters Becky and Hannah. Becky had been visiting me almost daily since I was in critical care. Becky worked at Broadgreen, so it was easy for her to pop by for 10 minutes at the end of her working day. That was always appreciated, Becky was always there, even if I didn't have any other visitors.

Setbacks

Monday, 5th December, they had started talking about sending me home soon, and went through the discharge instructions with me – i.e. what I was allowed to do and what I wasn't allowed to do in the first few weeks at home. I still had to undergo a final CT scan to ensure that everything was fine and I also still had to do a stair assessment to see if I could manage the stairs at home.

I did somehow work out how to order some flowers from Interflora and how to pay for them, to be sent to Sophie the next morning for her birthday. It was the most money I had ever spent on a bunch of flowers, but they were 2 dozen beautiful red roses with a vase and a personalised card. £110, and worth every penny!

That day, the physio girls that I had previously met in the ITU came by and took me for a walk. I had been doing a fair bit of walking around the ward without any problem. However, after walking for a bit, I suddenly felt faint. They quickly pulled up a chair for me to sit on. All of a sudden there were voices calling my name that were getting louder and I felt some hands patting my cheeks:

"Stefan, Stefan, stay with us!"

Just for a few seconds I had slipped away into unconsciousness. I noticed someone was holding my legs up in the air. They quickly organised a wheelchair and pushed me back to my bed. I felt groggy.

Mr Field came to see me shortly after this episode and I felt a bit deflated, because I had just suffered this setback.

It was my first setback. So far, up until then, things had just been continually improving.

The following day, Tuesday, 6th December, they told me I would be able to go home. Well, that would be quite something if I could go home for Sophie's birthday. I still needed the stair assessment and the CT scan, so they pushed me on a wheelchair to the CT scan room. The lady there welcomed me with a big:

"Well hello! It's good to see you sitting up and then standing up. Last time I saw you, you were unconscious and very, very poorly."

That was so nice. It's so nice to see that staff take a personal interest in the welfare of their patients. It must make it worth their while, when they see somebody improving.

A few hours later, after the CT scan, a young, Asian doctor came to explain to me that they had found a small blood clot on one of my lungs and they'd have to put me on Warfarin to dissolve it and it would take a few days to adjust my Warfarin levels and get my blood INR readings to be what they needed it to be before they could let me go home…

That was setback number 2.

I was gutted. For Sophie, and for me, and for the Catherine, Jessica and my mum, because I had told them all that I would come home that day.

So, I was on Warfarin then… I hadn't needed to be on Warfarin, because I had been given a tissue valve (cow's valve) rather than a mechanical one, which would have meant to be on Warfarin for the rest of my life. In my case, though, I only had to be on Warfarin for six months or so. Not too bad, I thought.

I think, Clive came to see me again that day.

It was hard to try and stay positive. I knew I was improving overall, but the setbacks had been a huge disappointment. Nevertheless, we had some fun on the ward, especially commenting on the pathetic excuse of a Christmas tree that wouldn't even light up.

On Friday, 9th December, I was trying to get ready for discharge again. I told Sophie she could pick me up that evening. Still had to do my stair assessment and I still needed some paperwork filling in. In the afternoon, I took the paperwork to the nurse's desk for them to fill in. As soon as I handed it over I started feeling faint again. I just said to the nurse:

"Oh, I'm not feeling too good right now…"

She said, "Pardon?"

I tried to repeat the words, but I had run out of time. I think I quickly tried to sit down on the floor, but instead I just passed out just after hitting my head on the floor.

I had managed to collapse in a gentle manner, I think, and I didn't think my bump was too bad.

I woke up to this alarm sounding, about 10 people around me. Someone lifting my legs and someone talking to me, asking me lots of questions like "what's your name?", "what's your address?" and "where are you?", which I was then able to answer. I later found out that the alarm had been sounding because someone had pressed the cardiac arrest button.

They brought my bed, helped me onto my feet and onto the bed and pushed me back to my room.

That was setback number 3. I was gutted.

I had a number of examinations after the fall, including another CT scan to check if I had any internal bleeding from bumping my head on the floor, but I got the all clear.

As a consequence of this second collapse, Mr Field ordered my beta-blockers to be reduced from a 10mg dose to a 2.5mg dose per day, since they knew that my blood pressure had been extremely low both times I collapsed.

I'd have to stay overnight for observation. Sophie was already on her way trying to get through the horrendous Friday traffic. I phoned Sophie, who was only 20 minutes away to warn her that she wouldn't be able to take me home after all. We were both as deflated as each other.

We spoke to the staff nurse who agreed that if I was able to go home the next day, she would authorise a taxi for me.

Going Home

…and so it came that on Saturday, 10th December, I finally had all my paperwork and completed my stair assessment without any further mishaps. At 4:45pm, one of the student nurses walked me down to the main entrance and at 5pm the black cab turned up to take me home.

I was still pretty weak for a few days and spent most of my time sitting on the sofa, but I was in good spirits and so glad to be home. Just before Christmas Eve, I was able to venture out and do a spot of Christmas shopping (only the bits that I hadn't managed to order online). It was simply the best Christmas ever, as I appreciated more than ever before that I was with Sophie, Catherine, Jessica and my Mum at this special time of year. I knew very well that this should not be taken for granted. I had been very lucky to have survived.

In January, we decided to host a party to which we invited everyone who had visited me in hospital – either Wrexham or Liverpool. It was the perfect opportunity to say thank you to everyone for caring and ultimately helping me recover so quickly.

In February I started my cardiac rehab programme to rebuild my lost muscles and get fitter again. I also started playing walking football with the a group of mainly retired gents (and 1 lady) in the village.

By mid-March I started my gradual return to work on 2 hours a day going up by ½ an hour every week.

Further Recovery

My colleagues at work have been very understanding and I have been having numerous sessions with occupational health to monitor my progress.

The cardiac rehab staff have also kept an eye on my and every few weeks I got a phone call to check on how I was getting on.

In April, I went on a golf trip with my work colleagues. Whilst this was a challenge in itself, as I had never played a full round of golf before, the fact that I was walking over 20k steps per day for two days on the trot gave me a lot of confidence in my physical fitness and resilience.

Since January I had been on only 3 types of medication – Warfarin, the 2.5mg beta-blocker and a dispersible aspirin. All of a sudden in mid-April I started to have dizzy spells and my blood pressure would get quite low, probably aided by my increasing fitness levels due to cardiac rehab and the weekly session of walking football.

I made an appointment to see Mr Field at Liverpool Heart and Chest and he told me to stop the Warfarin and the beta-blocker whilst continuing to self-monitor my heart rate and blood pressure on a regular basis. It meant that after just over 5 months since the operation I was only on a dispersible aspirin every day and that would be it for life, providing that my heart rate and blood pressure behave themselves.

This is really good progress and whilst I still have good days and better days, the overall recovery curve is heading in the right direction.

Epilogue

Writing this all down 6 months after the operation, I have realised how close I have come to dying and I fully appreciate the crucial factors in my survival. Survival rates aren't great for a type A dissection, especially considering that it took 8 days between the occurrence of the dissection and surgery. I consider myself very lucky to have survived.

I have most certainly spent considerable time thinking about and researching the possible reasons for the condition. I have been told multiple times by the doctors and nurses that the condition is not lifestyle related and unless there is a family history (which I am not aware of), it is just bad luck and a purely mechanical failure.

I am wondering if this means that medical research simply hasn't succeeded in identifying the proper causes for this condition yet. Maybe we will find out more in the future.

Thank you

I have so many people to thank for helping through this difficult time and sincerely hope that I haven't missed anyone.

Key People

Sophie – for insisting that I'd phone NHS Wales Direct, for taken me to A&E, looking after me, visiting me at every opportunity and her never-ending understanding and patience in my long road to recovery after returning home.

Catherine and Jessica – for their love and giving me plenty of reasons to get well again.

My mum – for flying over from Germany on the day of my operation, so she could be near me.

My dear friend Oli – for sorting out my mum's ticket and taking her to the airport.

All the staff at the Wrexham Maelor A&E – for looking after me so well and making sure that I would be seen by the right people.

Dr Southern – for diagnosing the type A dissection whilst I was at the Wrexham Maelor and transferring me to Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital.

Sister Sarah Anglesey and all the other staff at the Wrexham Maelor Intensive Care Unit – for looking after me so well whilst there.

Mr Mark Field, my surgeon at Liverpool Heart and Chest hospital, and his team – for saving my life in a marathon operation. I can't thank you enough.

All the critical care nurses, physio therapists, speech therapists and other staff at the POCCU (Post-Operative Critical Care Unit) at LHCH – for outstanding levels of care and personal concern during my initial post-operative recovery. Special thanks to Annabel, Roisin and Luis for looking after me a lot (and I remember your names, I'm sure there were many others, too).

All doctors, nurses, physio therapists, student nurses, kitchen staff and auxiliary staff at the Cedar Ward at LHCH – for your kindness and looking after me so well whilst on your ward.

All other hospital staff that don't feel included in any of the above groups but have had contact with me during my time there. You've all made a difference!

The Visitors

Everyone who came to see me in hospital, either at the Wrexham Maelor or at LHCH (and are not already included above):

- Mike Holland
- Norma Varnouse
- Paul 'Mabzi' Mahabir
- Kaye Hughes, Charlie and Teresa Ward
- Becky Varnouse
- Clive Jones
- Adam Howarth
- Dr John Williams
- Nichola Trawally
- Ian and Sarah Storer
- Hannah Varnouse

The Card Writers

Lots of people and groups of people have sent me lovely cards and cheered me up by encouraging, positive, sometimes sarcastic and sometimes even German wishes. It made a hell of a difference. I had a lot of time to look at the cards over and over again and really appreciated you taking the time to write and send them.

- Sophie, Barbara, Catherine and Jessica Paudler
- Mehdie, Norma and Hannah Varnouse
- Becky Varnouse
- The mbna Digital team – too many individuals to mention, I counted Paul Clark + about 32 other signatures!
- Carla, Jim, Elizabeth and Joe Sullivan
- Charlotte, John, Mary & Rachel Moran
- Matthew and Chloe Lobb
- The WilliamsLea Tag team at mbna – 11 signatures
- The mbna Tech team – 8 signatures
- Mel (Becky's friend)
- Helen and Alan Fletcher
- Joan, Derek and Vaughan Kingsnorth and Marie, as well as Anne-Marie Vaughan Pritchard and Thira Vaughan
- Tracey and Mat Emery
- The Hope Ringers – 8 signatures
- Teresa and Charlie Ward, Ethan, Megan, Grace, Kaye Hughes, Clive Jones, Kalvin and Nicole Williams and Aaron
- The mbna Dialogue team and proof-readers – 5 signatures

The Message Writers

I am seriously in danger of missing someone out of this list, as there have been so many messages by phone, SMS, Facebook, Facebook messenger, WhatsApp and Telegram, I am not even going to attempt to list them all.

Most of my German friends and relatives contacted me by phone or message services, as they are not such prolific card writers and therefore somewhat underrepresented in the lists above.

Contact

If you enjoyed reading this or if you have any other comments on the above write-up, I would love to hear from you. Please email me at stefan@paudler.co.uk.