

A Stroke Survivor on Writing in Lockdown

M. Quinn

Irish National Audit of Stroke Governance Committee.

Dear Sirs,

As we tentatively take our first steps out of lockdown it is appropriate to consider how we best used the great amount of free time that the pandemic and subsequent restrictions allowed for. In my case I took up something that I had always enjoyed doing, and that was writing. I suppose you could say that writing was in my DNA and whether it was taking minutes, compiling various types of reports or writing citations or indeed newspaper notes, it was something that I generally enjoyed and was considered to be good at. There are however many turns and twists along the road of life and often we have no control over where life will take us.

In 2013, I suffered a stroke which had a profound impact on my speech and my cognitive function. I can clearly recall the absolute terror of that moment, of trying to speak while doing an interview on local radio, and of no words coming out of my mouth. It is something that I am reminded of every time I do a radio interview. Apart from my speech my cognitive function was badly affected and considering my background in writing I found this to be extremely challenging. In the months and years after the stroke I challenged myself time and time again to regain my ability to write with the same fluency as I had before. The pandemic gave me a unique opportunity to work on my writing and I did this in writing some articles for my local newspaper before coming up with the idea of writing a book. I knew that this would involve a lot of research and would challenge me greatly in relation to my cognitive ability, but it was something that I felt that was within my grasp and would be a great achievement.

Being a lover of local history, I came to the idea of recognising Tipperary people from history who were noteworthy for various different reasons. I found that the more I looked the more I discovered, and I eventually stopped at 86. The research and compilation on each person was quite a challenge and there were days when I would start my writing and would have to discontinue as my brain would shut down or I would experience 'brain fog' or I would be completely fatigued. Anyone that has suffered a stroke will know exactly what I mean by this and will know how challenging it is for stroke survivors. It was important for me not to over task the brain and to allow time for rest and recuperation after long periods of research.

Suffering a stroke changed my life completely and presented me with many challenges to overcome but the challenge of writing and having a book published was nevertheless something that I relished undertaking.

Most people will not recognise or understand the level of the challenge of cognitive impairment because it is not something visual to people but dealing with impaired cognitive function following a stroke is tremendously difficult. Many people have used lockdown to do very different things. In my case it was to compile a book titled 'Tipperary People of Great Note', and to have it published by Orpen Press, but it was also to keep my brain active and in doing so to stay mentally well. Your brain is similar to a muscle, you need to use it, or you lose it so it was crucially important for me to keep my brain in shape.

I hope that all stroke survivors will take confidence from my achievement and will know that there is still so much that can be accomplished in life after stroke.

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