

THE Advocate

A VOICE FOR ACCESSIBLE, EQUITABLE AND EMPOWERED LIVES | 2023 AUTUMN ISSUE

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Birthday!

CELEBRATING OUR
HEALTHY LIVING CENTRES

Members share
their fitness tips

Adaptive yoga for
mind, body and soul

Meet Simba the
assistance dog

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Taking time for you

We are always reminded of the importance of taking care of yourself, but it's often hard to find the time and motivation, not to mention information on the best ways to get started.

That's why in this issue of The Advocate, we're sharing stories from our members about their journeys to better health, fitness and wellness, and the benefits they have experienced along the way.

From sporting achievements, exercise programs and adaptive yoga, to arm and hand therapy classes, we hope you find something for you in this issue.

It's also a fantastic opportunity to celebrate one year since we opened our Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane, and the third birthday of our Centre in Cairns – congratulations to the entire team on reaching these important milestones!

Our Healthy Living Centres were established to provide access to expertise, support and advice from our team of allied health professionals, all conveniently located in the one place, along with the opportunity to connect with others at the same time.

I also wanted to take a moment to mention some of our recent advocacy work, representing our members on key issues that are affecting their lives every day.

You may be unaware that our organisation supports polio survivors who are experiencing debilitating symptoms later in life, known as late effects of polio or post-polio syndrome.



Our aim is to increase community knowledge on this condition, among survivors themselves who may not understand the symptoms they are experiencing, as well as health professionals who need to provide more tailored care and support.

You can read more about our recent efforts, particularly in the aged care sector, on Page 25.

We are also continuing efforts to improve access and inclusion within businesses from many different industries.

This includes our EnABLED Business program which provides direct mentoring to small and medium-sized businesses in the Moreton Bay region, to encourage more employment for people with a disability and improve customer service.

Finally, I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge the sad passing of much-loved member of the Spinal Life community, Bill Peacock, late last year. Bill volunteered his time for many years hosting member meetings on Bribie Island, and was a passionate advocate for improvements to access and inclusion for everyone.

Bill's strength and support will be missed by many. Our thoughts are with his loved ones. [A](#)

GYL STACEY

DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?



Email us at theadvocate@spinal.com.au – we'd love to hear from you!

3 QUESTIONS WITH THE CEO

Mark Townend



What's been your focus this year so far?

As always, it's been a busy time at Spinal Life, with so much activity going on for our services as well as in the advocacy space.

We've been reviewing the way in which we seek customer feedback, including how often we check in. Feedback is always important, to see what we're doing right and where we may need to do better.

The results of our most recent customer survey were encouraging, with positive feedback received for our service areas including Personal Support and Home Care through to Supports Coordination, Plan Management and Allied Health.

The survey also identified some areas for improvement, which we are reviewing to see where we can implement changes quickly, and what needs to be addressed in the longer term.

In addition, we've recently sent out our annual member survey to hear feedback on services including advocacy and peer support, as well as research and innovation.

We're also planning quick check-ins to regularly see how you're going with our services, so please keep an eye out for these – and thank you for sharing your feedback with us.

What else has been happening at Spinal Life?

I wanted to share a good news story after one of our most recent audits, which demonstrates our commitment to ensuring our services are of the highest quality, while also welcoming any opportunities for improvement.

You may not be aware that Spinal Life regularly participates in audits of our services and programs, as an NDIS registered provider, and when requested by other funding bodies and government authorities.

In November last year, the NDIS Practice Standards and Quality Indicators were updated, particularly in relation to 'high intensity' support services, which require additional training for Personal Support Workers.

As a result of these updates, we were required to review our services to ensure we were meeting the new standards by 1 February 2023 – and I'm proud to say we found we have already been meeting or exceeding these new standards, and have been doing so for many years.

Even so, we are continuing to provide more professional development opportunities for our Personal Support Workers and other team members, to help further develop their skills in supporting our customers.

What are you most looking forward to?

It's always great to hear about our Advocacy team's efforts in such a broad range of areas, in response to feedback received from members about the challenges they are facing every day in the community.

This includes our work in the tourism and business sectors, and we've also been looking at improvements when it comes to buying tickets for events and concerts, along with making it easier to find information online about accessible housing to rent or buy. We hope to share some positive results soon – watch this space! [A](#)



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AUSTRALIA



This Sporting Life

Wheelchair be damned: how one man is playing *all* the sports

When a 15-year-old Brisbane teenager with cerebral palsy was adopted by a Samoan family, his best friend became his brother.

“My biological family told me they were moving into a new house and that it wasn’t accessible,” recalls that Brisbane teen, Jason, now 39. “Well, I *thought* they were my biological family, but actually they were my step-family... but that’s another story! Anyway, I called my best friend and told him I didn’t know where to go. He just said, ‘Give me a second, I’ll call Mum’”

And the rest is history.

Jason and his brother don't, however, share a surname. That's because Jason is named after boxing legend, Floyd Mayweather Jr.

"I had to change my surname when I was adopted," he explains, "and Mum said to me, 'Well, you love boxing so much, and Mayweather is the best, so why don't you have his name?'"

Jason didn't need to be asked twice. The idea of taking on the name of one of his heroes was hugely appealing to the young man whose love for combat sports – and motivation to train hard in a number of disciplines – only grew in intensity as he got older.

Wheelchair boxing is one such discipline. "Growing up as a kid all I wanted to do was fight," he says. He's also a qualified MMA judge, loves training MMA fighters at his gym, and goes to fight nights almost every weekend. "It's one of my favourite things in the world," he says. "I really want the fighters at my gym to do their absolute best and I support them as much as I can."

And then there's Krav Maga, the Israeli self-defence system that's derived from a combination of techniques used in aikido, judo, karate, boxing and wrestling. Jason attained a P1 (Practitioner Level 1) grading in this system that was specially developed for the Israeli defence force, and was told that he might actually be the only person in a wheelchair to have ever been graded. "I don't know if that's true or not," he says, "but it sounds good!"

But that's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Jason's sporting CV. He says there was also a bit of wheelchair basketball and wheelchair rugby when he was younger, and then casually lets slip that he actually represented both Australia and New Zealand in the sport of boccia.

"Boccia is a precision ball sport; a target sport that's very similar to lawn bowls, but played on a basketball court surface," he explains. "The objective of the game is to get more of the balls closer to the 'jack' than your opponent."

There are four different classifications in the sport, from BC1 to BC4. "I was a BC2: how you're classified is based on your function, disability and the way you play," says Jason. >



Jason tests his limits at the Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane.

Jason's dream is to be able to box professionally.



"You can throw or propel the ball using your left hand, right hand, both hands, overarm, underarm... any way you can. In the BC3 category, people who can't propel the ball themselves use a ramp and have an assistant who takes instructions about where to place the ramp and the ball."

Boccia is played in singles, pairs and teams: Jason played all of these, but it was as a single player that he excelled the most.

"I started playing in 2012, and made my debut for the Australian team eight months later," he says. "I had some notable wins against the world number six and the world number eight in my very first tournament, and I became obsessed with the game and obsessed with getting better. I told my club coach that I wasn't there to muck around; I wanted to be competitive and take it as far as I could. I wanted to prove to myself that I could be on the world stage."

And prove it he did. For eight years he competed internationally, travelling everywhere from Beijing for the 2013 World Championships, to Canada, Poland and Korea. At his highest point he was ranked number 20 in the world.

In a sport that's traditionally been quite genteel, there's no doubt that Jason really stirred things up.

"It's very quiet, very reserved," says Jason, "whereas I'm very flashy, flamboyant and loud. I like to talk trash and get into an opponent's head."

Thanks to his heritage, Jason was able to play for both Australia and New Zealand. He played for Australia for six

seasons, but as with every sport there's always politics and after a while Jason said he wanted to get away from the drama. "But it went deeper than that, and when I had the honour of representing New Zealand in a couple of trans-Tasman shields against Australia, it was very emotional for me," he says.

It was also an opportunity for Jason to beat his former teammates. "That was fun," he recalls. "It was my plan to make them very, very angry and call me a traitor and things like that, because I knew it would just add fuel to my fire. You can get as angry as you want at me; I just turn it into motivation."

Turning negatives into positives like this is a tactic that has served Jason well.

"It's pretty much my life story, to be honest, proving everybody wrong," he laughs. "When somebody tells me that I can't do something I'm like, 'Thank you... now watch me work'. Because once I get my mind set on something, I get obsessed with it. And once I'm obsessed, you're in trouble."

One example is when doctors told Jason that he'd never be able to walk. The fact that he never *had* walked didn't stop him, and sure enough he managed the 'impossible' and was able to take his first steps in 2018.

It's something he's still working on with his trainer, Spinal Life Exercise Physiologist Ernest Starowicz. "We're working with parallel bars and walking frames, just trying to increase my mobility and make me be the best version of myself that I can be," says Jason. "And prove all the doctors wrong!"



Jason had been working with Ernest at a gym in Brisbane for some time when the Exercise Physiologist said he was moving to work at the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre when it opened in Brisbane in February 2022. Jason's immediate response? "I'm coming with you."

He trains with Ernest twice a week at the Centre, and then goes in another four or five times a week to access the fitness equipment independently. "I really love the Healthy Living Centre," he raves. "I love the way it's set up and I love the equipment and how the HUR system lets Ernest and me keep on top of my program, my results and my goals."

Since the Healthy Living Centre opened in February last year, Jason has lost a massive 18 kilos. "As well as working out every day I also accessed a service that delivers my meals every week," he says. "I try to stick to that diet as much as possible, especially if I'm getting ready for an event, but I'm a big ice-cream lover so I do treat myself every now and then! But making healthier choices and getting fitter, stronger and lighter has made everything easier for me, especially everyday things like transferring."

Before Ernest introduced him to the team, Jason knew nothing about Spinal Life, but these days he's also seeing Occupational Therapists Erin Diviney and Yvette Farry regularly. "I decided to take full advantage of all the services on offer, and just switched over completely," says Jason. "I'm really happy; I've got a great Allied Health team now, and



Ernest not only understands my goals, but also modifies my training program to help me meet those goals every time."

Those goals have changed a little since last year, when Jason played in his final boccia competition and decided to retire from the game. "I just wasn't getting excited or nervous anymore, and I'd made a promise to myself that if that ever happened, I'd walk away."

Jason kept his promise, and has returned to his first love: fighting.

"I started boxing and MMA and Krav Maga as more of a self defence thing, and then I just fell in love with them," he says.

He hopes to become a boxing referee and get some "proper" fights soon.

"I've had a few wheelchair boxing fights in the past," he says, "and I'm hoping that things change soon, so that we get a wheelchair adaptive boxing league here in Australia and I can transition over to being a full-time fighter. Because that's what I want to do; I want to fight."

“Because that's what I want to do; I want to fight.”

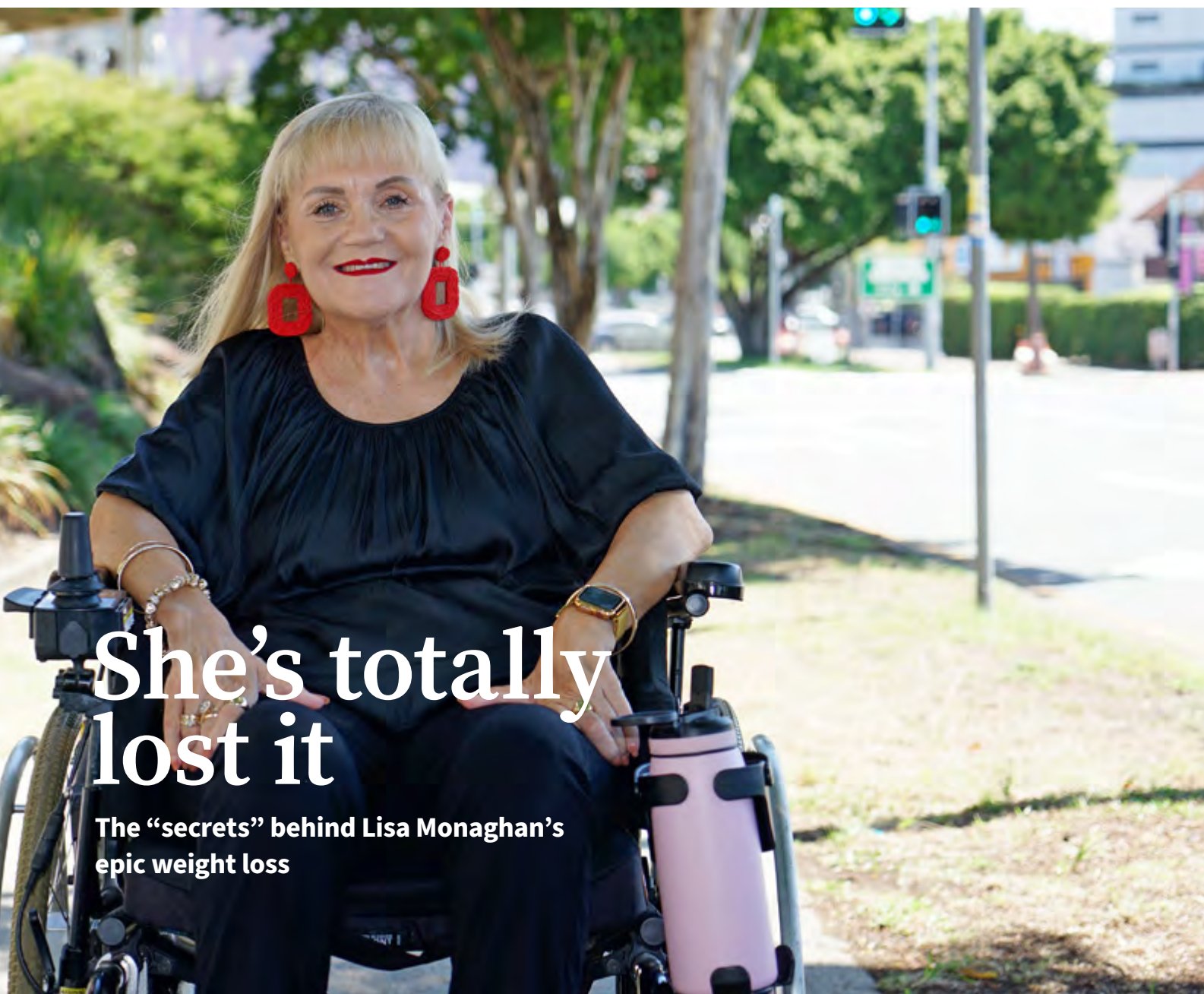
"My dream is to be able to box professionally, and to just be treated as an athlete like everybody else."

He even has a sponsor already, the fight apparel clothing

company, Havokk Clothing Company, who signed Jason up as their first adaptive athlete. Go to the website and you can support Jason by buying a "Team Mana Toa" supporter tee, which features the Samoan flag and the New Zealand fern, to represent both sides of Jason's family, as well as his nickname, *Mana Toa* ("supernatural warrior").

His goals may seem overwhelming, but no one who knows Jason doubts his ability to achieve them. "It's like I tell the people I coach," he says. "It really comes down to one question: How bad do you want it?" [A](#)

To find out more visit spinalhealthyliving.com.au/brisbane or call 1300 774 625.



She's totally lost it

The “secrets” behind Lisa Monaghan’s epic weight loss

Lisa Monaghan is a woman on a mission. The former phlebotomist, 61, who lives in Inala, Brisbane, has undergone such a transformation, both physically and mentally, that she barely recognises the woman she used to be, just a couple of years ago.

But it all goes back even further than that.

“Eighteen years ago, I had an operation that went wrong,” she says. “I went into hospital for a routine laminectomy on my C5/C6. The doctor said it would be very simple: they would just take the bulging disc out, put a titanium cage in, and then it would all be fine. But it seems they touched my spinal cord and it went into a stroke and gave me a spinal injury.”

The diagnosis was C5/C6 quadriplegia, with Lisa spending nine months in the Spinal Injuries Unit at the Princess Alexandra Hospital.

Her daughter, Erin, was 21 at the time, while her son Nathan was just 18. “They were marvellous, but they were babies,” says Lisa. “It was a lot of responsibility for Erin, who really took on the role of mum to Nathan as I was taken out of their lives for so long.”

Eventually, Lisa left the hospital and moved into a new home.

“I’d never lived on my own before in my whole life, and it was absolutely terrifying,” she remembers. “People say, ‘you’re amazing how you manage’ and all the rest of it, but you don’t really have a choice, so you just go to bed when the sun goes down and you wake up when the sun comes up.”

She also started intensive physiotherapy. “I went for three years, but the exercises weren’t really conducive to me being happy and feeling like I’d achieved anything,” she says. “It got to a stage where it was pointing out the things I *couldn’t* do,



Lisa at the Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane.

rather than what I *could* do. I stopped going because it was just too much of a downer.”

A whole decade passed, and Lisa eventually was convinced to try physiotherapy again; this time at Spinal Life with Physiotherapist Anthony Nakhle. “I was very hesitant to start again,” she says. “But Anthony took things very slowly and didn’t push me into anything that I didn’t want to do.”

And so Lisa started seeing Anthony for an hour every week, in a room at Spinal Life’s Woolloongabba office.

“He worked in a completely different way to the other physiotherapists I’d seen previously and I really gelled with him,” says Lisa. “And he was the only one up until then who really got through to me mentally: to get past that barrier of not wanting to do the work.”

The big breakthrough, however, came with the arrival of Lisa’s two beautiful granddaughters, in 2018 and 2020.

“Once they were born Anthony and I started talking about longevity, and something just clicked. He really got through to me about living a healthier lifestyle and looking after myself better. I just want to be here as long as I can for my kids and my grandkids. It really started me on the health journey that’s led me to where I am today.”

The journey has not been without its challenges, however, and in fact it very nearly came to an end last year, when Anthony said he was moving on from Spinal Life.

“I don’t like change, so to be honest, when Anthony said he was leaving I was really unsure about staying on,” Lisa confesses.

But stay on she did, working with Spinal Life’s Exercise Physiologist, Ernest Starowicz, and Physiotherapist, Linda von Moltke.

“I’m so happy I continued. Linda is a great physiotherapist. She’s really helped with the pain in my hip, leg and shoulders, which is severe and fairly constant, plus she irons out all the knots after Ernest has worked out with me,” laughs Lisa.

Working with Ernest has also been a revelation.

“Ernest is such a wonderful Exercise Physiologist, and I feel like my fitness has really improved since I started seeing him. I exercise pretty much every day now and I’m actually doing more physical stuff than before – he works me harder than I ever thought I could.”

Lisa sees Ernest and Linda three times a fortnight, and plans to increase this to four. Their meetings take place in >

Exercise Physiologist Ernest takes Lisa through her paces.



Spinal Life's Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane, which also gets a big thumbs-up from Lisa.

"It's wonderful. It's open, it's airy, and you're not on top of each other; you can have your own space. The equipment is excellent – but I really hate the arm crank!" she admits. "It's hard and it's painful: it's my absolute nemesis. But... when I first started I couldn't even do five minutes, and today I was on it for 12 minutes straight."

It's not just Ernest and Linda who have helped keep Lisa on track: "Frances Porter, the manager of the Healthy Living Centre, has also been a great help and I've also got a wonderful team of carers behind me. They encourage me, praise me, help with food prep and even take me to the Healthy Living Centre. So it's really taken a village. But I had to do the hard yards, and I'm so proud of what I've achieved."

Along with the gains Lisa has made in her fitness, she's also had a massive loss. A massive weight loss, that is.

"I've lost 22.1 kilos," she says. "I lost about 10 kilos with Anthony and then the rest with Ernest and Linda – and I'm still going. I feel like a different person. I've lost three dress sizes and had to get a whole new wardrobe."

Many (many!) happy returns

Happy birthday to the Healthy Living Centre Brisbane, which celebrated its first birthday in March. If you'd like to find out more, visit spinalhealthyliving.com.au/Brisbane or call **1300 774 625**.

Please speak to your GP or health professional before making any major changes to your diet.



So apart from the exercise, what else did Lisa do to get such incredible results?

"I basically just cut out all the rubbish," she says. "I've always been someone who had to have a couple of biscuits with their cup of tea, and because I was sedentary the weight was gradually piling on. So I stopped the sweet treats, and cut down portion sizes, but the biggest change has been doing intermittent fasting. I have my dinner at night and then I don't have anything until lunchtime the next day. Although I do have a cup of tea at 9am when my carers come. I can't go without my cup of tea – but no biscuits, of course!"

The compliments, as you'd expect, have been coming in thick and fast.

"It didn't matter how many people told me that I looked nice, I never felt it," Lisa says. "But now when people say to me, 'Wow, you look incredible,' I actually believe them. I feel good in myself and I go out feeling like I look good, too. Which is not something I think I've ever felt in my life before. Now, I'm in a marvellous place with my weight and a much better place mentally. I've just got so much more confidence in myself." **A**



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A photograph of Dennis Brinn, a man with glasses and a patterned shirt, and Georgia Fowler, a woman with blonde hair in a blue polo shirt, sitting at a table. They are both smiling and looking at a wooden box filled with colorful blocks. Dennis is wearing a blue and black brace on his left arm.

The scoop on the group

Why Spinal Life member Dennis Brinn loves the upper limb therapy group

Dennis Brinn was starting to think about retirement when a risky surgery threw him a massive curve ball.

The surgery was to help with a problem that Dennis had been experiencing for a number of years: “It started off as numbness and tingling in a couple of fingers, and then it was in my arm and then my shoulder, and as it progressed it was causing me more and more distress,” says Dennis, who lives in Palm Cove near Cairns with his wife, Cheryl. “No matter what I did to try and deal with the pain, it was just getting worse.”

After much investigation, it was discovered that Dennis’s pain was being caused by a condition called DISH, or diffuse idiopathic skeletal hyperostosis, a skeletal disorder that causes ligaments and tendons in the body to calcify.

“When I spoke to the surgeon we looked at all the options,” says Dennis, now 68. “One was to not do anything, but the problem was only going to get worse, and so was the pain. At that stage in my life I was looking forward to my retirement: I’d bought a caravan and a four-wheel drive, and Cheryl and I were ready to head off on some adventures. The decision to have the surgery was a no-brainer.”

It was a major and tricky operation, involving the removal of vertebrae from Dennis’s neck. “They had to do it in two

separate surgeries: one via the front of my throat, which took 10 hours, and one through the back of my neck, which went for 14 hours,” he explains.

Dennis’s surgeon had warned him of the potential dangers of this surgery, including the fact that abscesses could develop on his spine. “Unfortunately that’s what happened, and I was rushed in for surgery to remove them. That resulted in more problems, so I was transferred to Cairns Hospital because I needed acute facilities,” says Dennis, who spent a total of five months in hospital.

He left hospital having lost a lot of function in his left hand and arm, and some on his right, while numbness in his feet meant walking was a real problem. However, after a couple of years of sterling work from all of his medical and allied health teams, Dennis is in a much better place.

“I was a registered nurse for more than 25 years,” he says, “and as a nurse I’ve been very, very impressed by everyone at both the Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service, who looked after me first, and then at the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre Cairns, where I’ve been going for more than 18 months.”

“I chose Spinal Life because I was specifically looking for a one-stop shop. They have a great gym and a beautiful

heated pool where I have hydrotherapy, but above all they've got amazing allied health professionals, like my physios, occupational therapists and the bowel and incontinence nurse (from Coloplast, who visits the Centre). I've even got Spinal Life financial people looking out for me when it comes to my NDIS funding, through supports coordination and plan management. The whole business of having everyone together, it's just fantastic."

One of the services at the Healthy Living Centre that has really helped Dennis is the upper limb therapy group.

"They were starting up the group and asked me if I'd like to be involved," he says.

"I could see a couple of distinct advantages for being in a group: Firstly, it reduced the cost, which also comes out of NDIS funding. But mostly, it was just so good to be able to talk to other people who have similar issues. I find that sometimes that's just as important as the therapy. You can see people doing well, and you can see that some of them have got it harder than you. And so you start to think that it's not all about you: it's maybe what *you* can bring to the table."

Because Dennis can't feel his fingers, his main problem is grasping and holding things.

"But since I've been going to the upper limb therapy group my dexterity has really improved. I can now pick up small items and even put a pen in my fingers and sign documents roughly the same as I used to... if I take my time! They've also shown me techniques for eating so I can now cut my steak and don't have to stuff it in my mouth in one big piece," he says.

"They've really pushed me. I'm a very driven person and the more therapy I do, the more my brain is starting to let me put information together and build pathways to make my limbs operate properly."

The upper limb therapy group meets for 90 minutes twice a week, on Mondays and Fridays, but at this stage Dennis just does the Friday session.

"Between doing therapy and going to doctors and everything else, Monday is the only day that I get time with my wife," he explains. "So that day is sacred."

Cheryl, who like Dennis used to work at Cairns Hospital, but in the food services department, is now Dennis's full-time carer. "She stopped working as soon as she realised how bad I was," he says. "We've been married for 46 years and have six children and 12 grandchildren. I don't look at her as my carer; she's my wife."

Dennis learning to be a card shark at the Healthy Living Centre in Cairns.



“... it was just so good to be able to talk to other people who have similar issues.”

Dennis takes Cheryl a cup of tea every morning, carefully balancing their cups on a wheelie walker. After the complications from his operation he had to learn how to walk again and usually relies on his indoor or outdoor walkers, or a motorised wheelchair: "It lets me go further on my own, so I can go into Palm Cove and have a coffee." ➤

When Dennis puts on his special arm covers, he says it's like someone turns on a "no pain today, please" switch.



The upper limb therapy group involves functional activities with a focus on client goals.



A caffeine hit is something he looks forward to every day: “There’s a beautiful coffee shop in the same building as the Healthy Living Centre,” says Dennis, who goes there after his upper limb therapy group and other sessions. “I like to think of myself as a bit of a coffee connoisseur, and I reckon their coffee is probably up there in my top five.”

While things are looking up for Dennis now, he says he had a hard time coming to grips with his new reality.

“Early on I was doing my rehab, but at the same time I was going through a really bad time with my mental health. At one stage I was at risk, I openly admit that. I think it’s sometimes forgotten that patients can go through that stage.”

Dennis was helped through by his wife, his GP and his team at Spinal Life: “I’ve got a counsellor and a psychologist, who I see at the Healthy Living Centre on a fairly regular basis,” he says.

“Since I’ve been doing therapy I now feel that I’ve got some worth. I’ve even been accepted to be a community advisor with the Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service, so I’ll be talking with people going through similar things that I’ve already navigated. I know that I’ve got something to offer: I’m not ready to be thrown on the scrap heap!” **A**

For more details about the upper limb therapy group, visit spinalhealthyliving.com.au or call **1300 774 625**. One-on-one appointments are also available in Brisbane.



Grasping the basics

Lucy Burke, one of Spinal Life Australia’s brilliant Occupational Therapists, has been helping Dennis on his journey to improve function in his arms. We asked Lucy for an insider’s view.

“We refer to an evidence-based program called GRASP,” she says. “It’s a functional activity program with a focus on client goals, like hand writing and holding cutlery. It helps people activate key arm and hand muscles, so that the brain can re-learn how to control these muscles.”

The activities are simple, but have the potential to bring about great improvements. They’re grouped into five sections: stretching, hand skills, arm strengthening, coordination and hand strengthening, and involve all sorts of props – everything from Lego, poker chips, coins and clothes pegs, to paper clips, blocks, jars, tennis balls and toothpicks!



RESPITE & REHABILITATION

The Healthy Living Centre Cairns offers one and two bedroom units fitted with industry-leading adaptive equipment and home automation. Available for short and medium-term stays, there is also the added benefit of having Spinal Life Allied Health professionals, a fully accessible gym and hydrotherapy pool on-site to assist with all your rehabilitation and wellness needs.

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 **Spinal Life**
Healthy Living Centre

A woman with red hair and glasses, wearing a black t-shirt and black leggings, is sitting in a lotus position on a blue yoga mat. Her hands are pressed together in a prayer position (Anjali Mudra) in front of her chest. She is looking directly at the camera. In the background, there is a large green plant in a white pot and a white wall.

Going with the flow

Meet Lisa Bidgood, Spinal Life's adaptive yoga guru

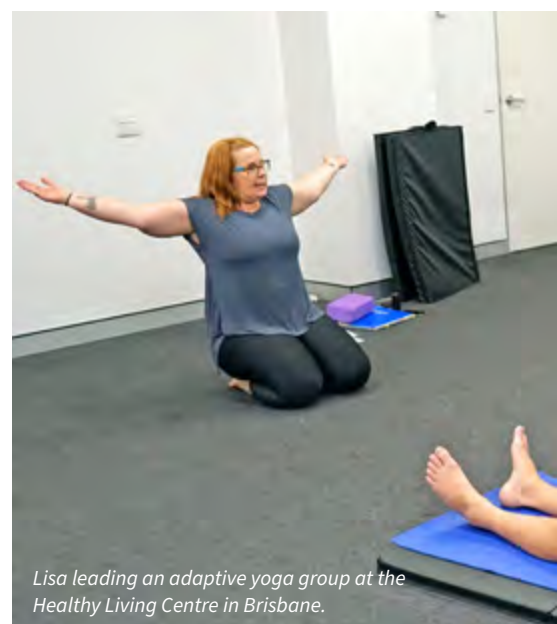
If you're a Spinal Life client who lives on the Sunshine Coast and sees an Occupational Therapist regularly, chances are you know Lisa Bidgood already.

Or maybe you know her from the classes she holds every Tuesday at the Healthy Living Centre in Woolloongabba.

And if you don't know this relatively new recruit, who joined the Spinal Life team in November 2021, you're going to want to. Because, as well as being an OT for more than 18 years, Lisa is also Spinal Life's adaptive yoga guru.

"I call it adaptive yoga because otherwise people think they can't do it," she explains. "But really, it's just yoga."

Ah, but what *is* yoga, exactly?



“When you look at social media, yoga is all 20-year-old people in bikinis doing handstands on a beach in Mexico,” laughs Lisa.

But of course that’s not what it’s about at all.

“To the people who developed it thousands of years ago, yoga was something you practiced in order to get your body and mind in tune so that you could meditate,” explains Lisa.

“The type of yoga I teach is not about jamming your body into a traditional pose. Instead, it’s about taking the essence of a pose and letting it fit your body. For example, downward dog is a yoga position with a well-known shape... but you can do a downward dog lying down, you can do it sitting down, you can do it leaning against a wall.”

These revelations came to Lisa after she travelled to the USA to train with Matthew Sanford, a yoga practitioner who was paralysed from the chest down at age 13. “I wanted to become a qualified yoga instructor, specifically for people who had trauma, a chronic illness or a disability,” says Lisa, “and Matthew is not only living this reality, he’s also one of the best yoga teachers I’ve ever had the pleasure of learning from.”

Up until that point, Lisa had been working as an Occupational Therapist at Royal Rehab, a private hospital in Sydney renowned for specialist rehabilitation treatment and services.

“Prior to that I’d been a travel agent,” she says, “but while I was travelling the world I just couldn’t escape the feeling that there had to be more to life. I didn’t know what I wanted to do, I just knew I wanted to give back.”

“I call it adaptive yoga because otherwise people think they can’t do it...”

Lisa moved to Melbourne to study at La Trobe University as a mature-age student, and after completing her four-year Bachelor of Occupational Therapy degree, returned to Sydney.

It was there, while working at Royal Rehab, that Lisa met a young guy who had a severe brain injury. “He no longer had the ability to walk, and had upper-limb weakness and a lot of cognitive problems,” remembers Lisa. “I couldn’t get him to engage in any kind of therapy; he didn’t want to do *anything*. But then, one day, he said, ‘I want to do yoga.’”

The request would change Lisa’s life’s path.

“I was an avid yoga practitioner myself, but all my experience was with Bikram yoga, which is 42 degrees, 26 postures and really hardcore,” she says.

“I wondered how I could make yoga possible for this guy, which ultimately led me down the road to train with Matthew Sanford in the US.”

Lisa returned to Australia bursting with incredible knowledge, skills and a passion to get started: “I knew what yoga did for my mind and body, and thought that it should be accessible for everybody,” she says.

However, she soon realised that, unlike in the US, teaching yoga as part of her job as an Occupational Therapist was simply not possible in Australia. “Instead, I had to open my own business as a yoga teacher

and be employed by Royal Rehab separately. I basically had to offer yoga as an entirely separate, second job.”

For more than 10 years, Lisa’s two skill sets, OT and yoga, never met.

She moved to Queensland in 2021, and before too long had found a house that she loves, near Coolumb on the Sunshine Coast, and a job that she loves, as an OT with Spinal Life Australia.

“Right from the start I talked with Frances Porter, who oversees the Healthy Living Centre, about how we could incorporate yoga into Spinal Life’s offerings,” she says, “but at that stage I was still unable, as an OT, to offer yoga to my clients.”

But then, one day, about six or eight months later, she discovered that the rules had at long last changed and yoga could be funded through the NDIS for people with disabilities, among other payment options. ➤



“It was a long time coming, but after more than 10 years it finally happened,” says Lisa. “I had battled on the sidelines for so long, and during that time even did a master’s degree by research on the benefits of yoga for people with spinal cord injuries. So when we heard the good news, Frances and I immediately went, ‘When do we start?’ ”

Today, Lisa offers an adaptive yoga class every Tuesday afternoon at the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre in Brisbane; mornings are dedicated to one-on-one upper limb therapy appointments.

“We offer yoga in a group situation – six people max, for a six-week block – because we know how important it is to have other people there,” she explains. “It helps to break down barriers and create a sense of camaraderie: all the mucking around, chit-chatting and networking are really important.”

“Every class runs for 60 minutes and includes the *asana*, which is yoga poses, the *pranayama*, which is breath work, and a 15-minute meditation,” Lisa says. “Hopefully people are seeing that there’s another way to manage emotions and thought processes.”

In week one Lisa made the decision to hold half of the session in chairs, and the other half on the floor. “I was a little hesitant before we started, thinking about potential problems and skin pressure issues,” explains Lisa, “but working on the floor, without the boundaries of a wheelchair, gives you so much more range and freedom to move.”

The following week, when the six participants arrived for their second class, five of them got straight onto the floor.

“I tried to remind them of the 50/50 plan, but one guy said, ‘I’m in my chair all the time and getting out of it was the best thing about last week – I’m getting on the floor!’ From that moment on, I’ve left it up to each individual; it’s totally their choice.”

The benefits participants are gaining from Lisa’s classes are the same that all yoga practitioners experience: improvements in balance and muscle strength, self-management skills that help with things like anxiety or mood changes, relaxation, and the opportunity to connect with their whole body.

Plus, of course, the social side that comes with being in a group. “There’s lots of laughter and a few, ‘You want me to do *what*? You’ve got to be kidding!’ moments,” says Lisa. “And then five minutes later they’re like, ‘Look at me, I’m doing it!’ ” **A**



“I knew what yoga did for my mind and body, and thought that it should be accessible for everybody,” says Lisa.

Just breathe

We asked Lisa for some breathing techniques if you want to practice mindfulness quickly and easily. Her advice was a breath of fresh air!

“One of the best things about a *pranayama* or breathing practice is that no one knows you’re doing it. You can do it at any time: whether you’re in a yoga class or in the cereal aisle at Woolies. An easy technique is called box breathing, or square breathing. You breathe in for a count of four; pause for a count of four; breathe out for a count of four; and pause again for a count of four... and with each count of four you visualise making a side of a box. Our breath is the first thing that’s triggered when we get agitated or anxious, and we start to breathe a lot faster. By doing these really long, slow breaths and distracting your mind as you count to four, you should hopefully engage your diaphragm, which starts an anatomical reaction that automatically starts to relax you. We all have that ‘fight or flight’ reflex, but there’s research to suggest that we can have the same response with relaxation – we just have to train ourselves for it. If you practice this breathing, at some point your body will just go, ‘Aaah I know what this is; this is where I calm down!’ ”




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The goodest boy

Meet Simba, assistance dog extraordinaire and subject of a gorgeous new children's book

If you've been reading *The Advocate* for many years, you might recognise the name Christa Schweizer. She's the Spinal Life member who took the body corporate of her South Bank apartment building to court, over a lack of accessibility.

"It was a six-year process but we had a major legal victory, and it only happened thanks to Spinal Life," says Christa, now 67.

Christa and Spinal Life joined forces again recently to take on another big challenge: trying to get funding for an assistance dog from the NDIS. They scored an incredible victory – and thankfully it didn't take six years this time!

The story starts when Christa was a nine-year-old girl living in Switzerland, and had a medical mishap that caused damage to her spinal cord and the parts of her brain that affect the eye nerves.

"Things just got worse and worse as I got older, and I've been legally blind and a wheelchair user for 28 years now," she says. "Because of this, I've had assistance dogs for decades."

Having an assistance dog has allowed Christa, who emigrated to Australia almost 40 years ago, to lead a full and independent life.

In retirement, her beloved dogs get to enjoy their off-duty life with Christa, who never parts with them. So when her most recent dog, RJ (aka Romeo Junior), reached retirement age, Christa set out to find his successor. This time, however, she decided to seek NDIS funding, despite previous advice that assistance dogs would not be funded until they were fully certified, which meant she'd have to cover all training expenses.

Thankfully with the help of Spinal Life's advocacy efforts, plus her stellar track record of working with assistance dogs, Christa was finally successful in her funding application.

"We had to fight so hard, but we got there," says Christa.

Another crucial part of the process was, obviously, finding the perfect puppy. Enter Trish Harrison from Misty Mountain Labradoodles, who's been breeding Australian labradoodles on Tamborine Mountain for nearly 15 years.

"They have a lovely mix of the smarts of a poodle and a labrador, and the playfulness of a lab, and make wonderful assistance dogs because they're incredibly intuitive," says Trish.

“ Simba is so smart and stable, and has such a calm temperament...” ”



"I've seen what these dogs can do even *without* specific training, and they just seem to know what's required of them. They're very loyal to their owner, plus they're non-shedding – and very cute!"

Trish had a litter of six pups to choose from when looking to find a perfect match for Christa, and says she could tell straight away which dog was 'the one'.

That dog was Simba.

"Christa had a female puppy in mind, but when we put her on Christa's lap she wouldn't sit still. Then we put Simba on her lap and it was a totally different story: he was so calm. And Christa said, 'I think this is the one!'"

Like all of Trish's labradoodles, Simba was taken through a highly structured training and handling program from the time he was three days old.

For obvious reasons Christa couldn't raise a puppy, so when he was eight weeks old Simba went to live with foster parents, Debbie and Tony Sharrock. They raised Simba for the next four months of his life, making sure he was fully toilet trained and taking him to see Christa every weekend.

He also underwent specialist puppy training during this time, performed by Suzie Thompson from Animal Stars. As well as teaching him crucial commands, she also desensitised him to things like skateboards, lizards and traffic – all the things that could be a distraction in the future.

"Christa – and of course RJ – also played a big part in the training," says Trish.

"She is one amazing woman, and having had three other assistance dogs, she really knows what she's doing."

At six months of age, Simba finally got to move in with Christa (and RJ!), where his training continued but now with Sam Gallagher also on the case. She's an accredited Queensland Guide, Hearing and Assistance Dogs (GHAD) trainer, and the owner of In the Paws of Angels Inc.

"Christa is quite simply one of the smartest women I have ever met and she has overcome such obstacles," says Sam. "It was an absolute privilege to have worked with her and Simba, who is so smart and stable, and has such a calm temperament. He's the youngest dog I've ever passed at GHAD."

These days Simba, who turned two on March 24, is proving exactly why the NDIS's ultimate faith in him was well-deserved.

He goes into working mode the moment his jacket and harness go on and Christa utters a single word: 'work'.

"Thanks to him I'm able to go out and function like a normal wheelchair user," says Christa. ➤



Christa and Simba with Suzie Thompson, Sam Gallagher, Debbie and Tony Sharrock, and Trish Harrison.



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Keeping Simba from distractions when they go out is crucial. But you'd be surprised how many people don't know – or choose to ignore – the 'rule' that you shouldn't approach service dogs, or allow your dog to interact with them.

It was Christa's personal experience with this that prompted Trish to write an illustrated children's book.


"Christa rang me one day and I could hear the distress in her voice," says Trish. "Somebody had decided it would be fun to let their dog approach Simba and RJ, so poor Christa was stuck trying to cross at some busy traffic lights with her dogs out of 'work mode'. It made me realise we really needed some more education about what people should and shouldn't do around assistance dogs."

Simba the Super Assistance Dog, which was published late last year, tells the story of Simba's journey to becoming an assistance dog – and gives some brilliant, helpful and clearly much-needed advice to people about what to do when they see an assistance dog in the community.

"Like the book says: when an assistance dog is wearing its jacket, it's just like a superhero wearing their cape," says Trish. "And you don't interrupt a superhero when they're wearing their cape!"

Trish hopes that one day her book will be available in schools, so education can start early: "I self-published and it cost me an absolute fortune, but it was a fun project. I plan to use money from the book to provide assistance dogs for people who don't have the means. There's so much need out there and I just know what an impact they can have on people's lives."

Christa also hopes that other people in need will be able to get a canine superhero as beautiful, loving and well-trained as Simba, and also the same NDIS funding that Spinal Life was able to access for her.

"We worked so hard to hopefully open the door for others," she says. 

*We've got three copies of **Simba the Super Assistance Dog** to give away! To enter the draw, simply send an email to theadvocate@spinal.com.au with your name and postal address. Winners will be randomly drawn.*

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Polio survivor Lyn Glover is helping raise awareness.



CATCH UP WITH YOUR COMMUNITY

Our Peer Support catch-ups are held across Queensland and Western Australia. Keep an eye on Facebook and our website for updates on upcoming events.

If you'd like to connect with our Peer Support, Post Polio or Transverse Myelitis Groups in your region, please use the contact details below.

Spinal Life Peer Support Groups

BRIBIE ISLAND: Ross Duncan on 0475 077 080.

BRISBANE: Fred Nitz on 0412 190 585.

BUNDABERG: Steve Richter on 0413 457 284.

MACKAY: Debra Reaves on 0487 021 735.

MORETON BAY: Ross Duncan on 0475 077 080.

ROCKHAMPTON: Robynne Clifton on 0473 576 107 or Anne Guthrie on 0407 116 035.

Post Polio Groups

CAIRNS: Joy Hay on 4055 5795.

GOLD COAST: Lyn Glover on 0448 206 856 or Joan Radanovic on 0413 178 073.

SUNSHINE COAST: Cathy Newman on 5447 6608.

Transverse Myelitis Group

Contact Jodi Gallon on 0451 235 860.

Join our community today at spinal.com.au/membership or call 1300 774 625 to find out more.

THE LEGACY OF POLIO

Polio may be a long-forgotten part of our nation's history for most people, yet survivors of the disease continue to battle with the ongoing effects later in life.

For the estimated tens of thousands of Australian polio survivors, many will experience late effects of polio or post-polio syndrome, which leads to potentially debilitating symptoms.

Unfortunately, the condition is still relatively unknown, even among survivors themselves who may not understand the symptoms they are having, which can often be dismissed as signs of ageing and therefore not managed properly.

For many years, Spinal Life has been working to raise awareness of late effects of polio, particularly among health professionals to improve diagnoses and treatment.

As part of our advocacy efforts, we recently turned our focus to the aged care sector, with CEO Mark Townend encouraging all aged care workers to attend Polio Australia training workshops.

"It's so important that knowledge and awareness of post-polio conditions and the impacts are known to aged care facility operators, administrators, and staff, in order to better care for the survivors of this terrible disease," Mark said.

"We're also encouraging family members to check in with their loved ones to see if they have had polio, in case they may be experiencing symptoms."

Symptoms can include increased fatigue, muscle weakness, joint pain, increased sensitivity to cold, difficulties with swallowing and sleeping, and adverse reactions to anaesthesia and medications. [A](#)

Visit spinal.com.au/polio to find out more about late effects of polio or enquire about a training workshop.



Caitlin with her fur babies, Betsy and Louie

Getting to know... Key Worker, Caitlin Cooper

Caitlin Cooper, 28, loves visiting the family farm she grew up on in Tasmania – but she also loves her new life in Cairns, where she's lived for the past five years.

For four of these years Caitlin has worked for Spinal Life Australia, so we asked this mother of two beautiful children (and two fur babies, Louie the miniature dachshund and Betsy the pug) to tell us a bit more about herself and her much-loved job...

What three words describe you best?

"Compassionate, happy and empathetic."

Have you always been a Key Worker, or did you start off in another role?

"I started off as a Personal Support Worker [PSW] and then became a Key Worker. I really enjoy meeting and working with the clients and am so grateful for both roles."

What sort of experience/qualifications did you have in order to secure the role of PSW?

"When I started as a PSW I'd actually just finished my aged care qualifications. But I was more interested in working in the disability field, so I applied for the position at Spinal Life and, four years later, I am still here!"

What do you think are the main qualities somebody needs to be a good Key Worker/PSW?

"You need to be empathic, compassionate, willing to learn, respectful, dedicated, positive and passionate about what you do."

What are the main responsibilities of a Key Worker? Can you describe an average day?

"As I still get to support clients each day I usually do support shifts first, then I go into the office and work closely with my Client Service Officer [CSO], and do things like training and mentoring small groups of PSWs."

What's one item that you often recommend to people with a spinal cord injury, to make their life easier?

"A slow cooker. The food just cooks all day and is ready to serve at dinner time."

What's the one thing you wish people understood better about people with spinal cord injuries?

"That although someone might be in a wheelchair, they are still equal with everyone else: their disability doesn't make them any different."

How do you relax when you're not at work?

"If I'm not camping, fishing or out and about exploring new places, I'm usually at the beach or by the pool with the kids and pooches, watching a good TV series or walking/bike riding."

What's the best thing about your job?

"Being with my clients and knowing I am making a difference in their lives."

What's the hardest thing about your job?

"When a client says negative things about themselves due to their disability."

What's the most important advice you would give anyone thinking of becoming a Key Worker/PSW?

"Please come into this role with the utmost respect and an open mind. Our clients welcome us into their lives and homes, and rely on us to help them live the life they deserve. It's our responsibility to provide the very best care we can." **A**

We're recruiting for Personal Support Workers across Queensland and Western Australia! If you know someone who would be perfect for the role, encourage them to visit spinal.com.au/careers to find out more.

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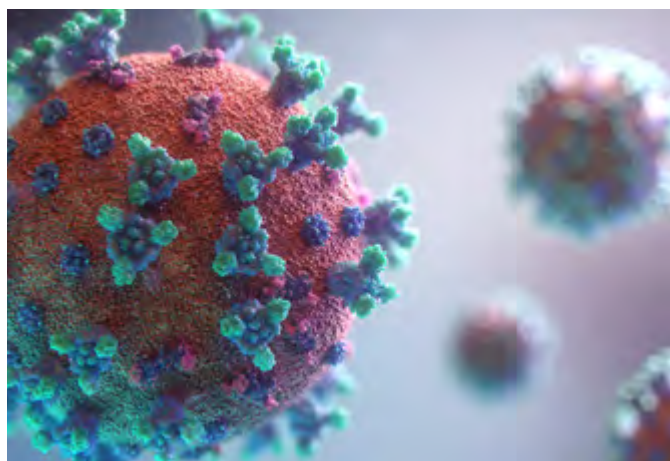
*In vitro data on file.
1. In vitro data on file - WHR 16933 TA 1369 FeelClean Phase 1 Report. 2. A Multi-Centre Clinical Investigation to Assess the Performance of GentleCath™ Glide Intermittent Catheters. Study U378 GentleCath™ Glide Final Report. July 2018. Data on File. ConvaTec Inc.
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STUDY EXPLORES COVID-19 IMPACTS

The Hopkins Centre recently published the results of a study into the impacts of COVID-19 for people with spinal cord injury.

The study was conducted in collaboration with Spinal Life and involved an online survey, which looked at physical effects people experienced due to less activity, as well as the psychosocial impacts due to isolation, including negative effects on mental health and financial implications from loss of employment.

The study also explored the difficulties people had with accessing telehealth, in-home support and equipment and consumables.

Participants also identified solutions they had found to combat challenges including using more technology such as telehealth and online shopping, exercising at home, finding new in-home supports and starting new routines at home and at work.

The results will be shared across Queensland Health and can be used to better plan and prepare for future events like natural disasters or large-scale emergencies, which may cause significant stress to existing service systems.

Read more about this project at hopkinscentre.edu.au under 'News'.

This research was supported by a 2021 RACP MAIC Career Development Fellowship Award, as well as funding from The Hopkins Centre, Motor Accident Insurance Commission, and Metro South Health.



Alison and Terry Cokeley with Spinal Life CEO Mark Townend at the launch of the Disability Doesn't Discriminate campaign.

OVER 65s BATTLE NDIS EXCLUSION

The fight to improve access to funding for people with a disability aged over 65 years old is continuing.

Mitry Lawyers is launching class action proceedings against the Commonwealth Government on behalf of people who are 65 years and over who have a disability, due to their exclusion from the NDIS.

The Lead Plaintiff in the class action, Helen Bonyng, is a 71-year-old resident in the inner west of Sydney who has lived with paraplegia for the past eight years. She turned 65 just six weeks before the NDIS started where she lives in Sydney's inner west and was denied access to funding.

The class action follows in the footsteps of the Disability Doesn't Discriminate campaign, which commenced in 2021, coordinated by Spinal Life with 28 partner organisations.

Visit mitry.com.au/ndis to find out more.

OPENING DOORS FOR DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT

Our EnABLED Business program is continuing to provide valuable one-on-one mentoring to businesses in the Moreton Bay region, aiming to increase employment for people with disability and improve customer service at the same time.

Business Inclusion and Diversity Officer, Brendan Somerville (*pictured*), has been working with businesses to conduct audits of their physical premises and provide recommendations, along with holding workshops with staff to promote better access and inclusion.

Industries who have taken part so far include tourism operators,

accommodation providers, transport businesses, retail stores, information technology providers and more.

The project is delivered in partnership with the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations and is proudly funded by the Queensland Government through its Growing Workforce Participation Fund.

If you know a business who would be interested in taking part, visit spinal.com.au/enabled-business to find out more. [A](#)



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Dale being interviewed about his team's prize-winning device.

ICONIC BIONICS

A game-changing innovation is set to help people with spinal cord injuries cough

Congratulations to Dale Neville and his team of fellow students at QUT, who recently won first prize in an extraordinary competition.

Organised by Bionics Queensland, with the support of the Motor Accident Insurance Commission, the inaugural Student Bionics Innovation Challenge was designed to fast-track bionic innovations to change the lives of those impacted by trauma.

It attracted some noteworthy entrants, and we especially loved to hear about Dale's success, because he's a former Spinal Life Personal Support Worker! We asked Dale a few questions about his team's winning entry:

When did you work at Spinal Life?

"I was a Personal Support Worker at Spinal Life from 2008 to 2010. It was my part-time job while I was studying medicine at James Cook University in Townsville. I completed four years out of the six, but had to leave because I became severely unwell. I went back home to Rockhampton and spent some time there, and then three years ago started another undergraduate degree, this time in medical and mechanical engineering at QUT in Brisbane. I've got about 18 months to go."

You're part of a team of four: how did you all come together?

"The CEO of Bionics Queensland, Dr Robyn Stokes, gave a talk at QUT explaining the competition. I told one of my professors, Devakar Epari, that I was keen to enter, so we advertised for people to join the team. Three people joined: first year mechanical engineering student, Anna Michael, Sophia Tran, who's a medical and mechanical engineering student like me, and Maggie-May Hornigold, who's doing a dual degree in engineering and business management."

How did you come up with your prize-winning idea?

"We were looking to find ways to help people with a spinal cord injury become more independent. Everyone pitched their own ideas and we considered lots of different things, but we ended up going with my idea: a cough assistance device."

And the idea stems back to your time with Spinal Life?

"Yes, I regularly had to help clients with a physical cough procedure. I talked to people at Spinal Life and was very surprised at how little progress had been made, and how they were still relying on old technology."

How does your concept work?

"There are two components. The first is a mechanical intervention to help people cough. At the moment, any sort of assisted coughing device is not hugely effective, and still usually needs someone to physically help as well. Our device will be a wearable strip that goes over the abdomen or is secured to the bed, depending on what sort of force is needed. It will deliver a sharp inward and upward thrust that will help people with a spinal injury to cough. It's basically a mechanical version of what a carer would do."

And the second component?

"We want to make sure that people with a high level spinal cord injury can also use this device. We'll do that using something called a brain control interface (BCI). In really simple terms, it's an ECG that gets attached to someone's head and reads their brainwaves. Then they go through a process of training so that they can control the device with their brain, regardless of their level of injury."

So, what's the next step?

"The prototyping phase. We're going to do modelling and simulation first, which will help us to get things right before we build a scale prototype of the actual device. We won a \$7,000 cash prize that we plan to use on developing the BCI kit, doing the physical prototyping and talking to people so we can be sure to deliver what they want and need."

When do you think the device will be on the market?

"Based on current progression, I think maybe eight years. But this is an extra-curricular thing for us right now, while we study for our degrees. If it was to stop being a side project, that time frame would probably be accelerated. **A**

Visit bionicsqueensland.com.au for more insights on the Challenge winners.



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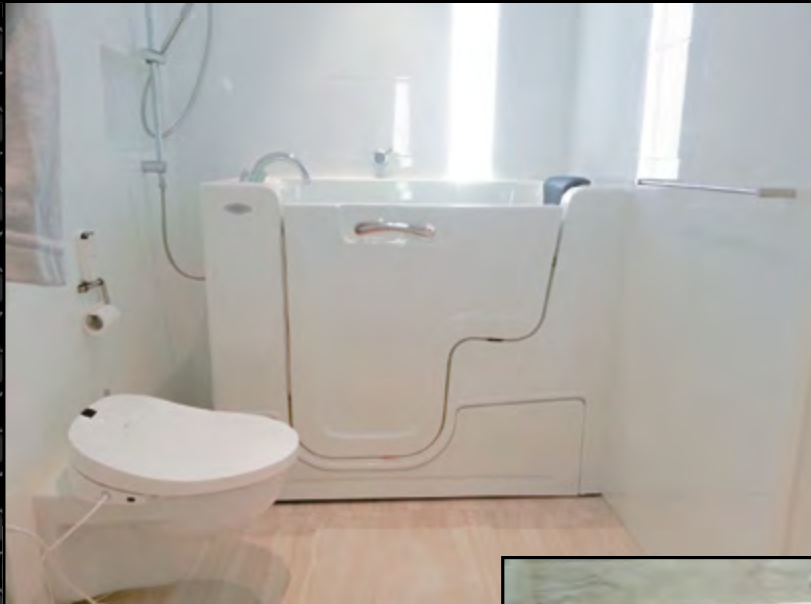
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