

Comments – Frank Cerasoli,
Traumatic Brain Injury Survivor
9/9/08

I.

My name is Frank Cerasoli, and I'm a brain injury survivor. One of my big challenges in life is my short term memory deficit, so I hope you don't mind, but I'll be reading to you a little bit about me.

It all started on December 13, 1990... 18 years ago... when I was involved in a motor vehicle accident and was rushed to this hospital, UCSD Medical Center, with bleeds in my brain. I had only been in San Diego a few years after being honorably discharged from the U.S. Navy after serving as an air traffic controller for 5 years. But as a young 27 year old person with everything going for him, I had not counted on a brain injury changing my life. Well, it did.

Here at UCSD Medical Center I was placed in a drug-induced coma, was intubated, and had several seizures right here in the Surgical Intensive Care Unit. I was very combative and I had no recollection of either my accident or my environment. I finally left UCSD to start months of rehabilitation where I had to learn how to walk, talk and regain my most basic functions as a human being.

II.

But after my rehabilitation stopped, then the real challenges of living with the deficits associated with a brain injury started. To a lot of people who I casually come into contact with, they think I'm normal because I can carry on a conversation and I don't have any physical disabilities. The doctors have told me I am one of the many TBI survivors with Hidden Brain Injury. To give you just a little glimpse into my world, I'd like to walk you through a day in the life of a TBI survivor.

I wake up in the morning to a house I share with roommates because I don't have the ability to safely live on my own, even at 45 years old. I immediately consult my daily planner, which has everything that I need to do written down... such as my share of the house chores. Because of my seizures, I take 2 anti-seizure medicines 3 times daily, and because of my short term memory challenges I have to mark down when I take them so that I don't miss a dosage. I have had an occasional grand mal seizure and I don't want to have another one. I can deal alright with the ongoing petit mal seizures, which tend to disorient me for a few minutes at a time.

I often try to catch up with the most basic things in my personal life, such as balancing the checkbook or paying bills, but because I have an initiation deficit as well, it is hard for me to actually get started and complete a task. So, usually I just leave the paperwork unfinished and set out on my day.

I currently do not have a job but would like to try to get one and feel I could be a good and loyal worker. If I can get into a daily routine that doesn't change, I feel I could work again. I lost my driver license when I got brain injured, so I must depend on public transportation to get around town, so instead of being able to just drive over to a store or a doctor's office in a half hour, I must try to plan the trip on several different buses and trolleys. This often confuses me and I arrive late, miss the appointment, or it takes me all day long to get there and back.

As for eating, I have a hard time remembering how to cook meals or what I have recently bought at the supermarket, so I usually go out to find a cheap cafeteria, where I know I will at least get a decent, nutritious meal. It can be difficult for me to associate with other people in a meaningful way since I have a hard time communicating my thoughts correctly. Because part of my TBI was in the frontal lobe, I am often inappropriate with people, say the wrong things at the wrong time, and cannot control my emotions well. At that point I try to show them one of my medic alert bracelets so that they know I am a TBI survivor... this often helps me out.

Because I have few inhibitions after the brain injury, I do and say what I feel like “in the moment” without being able to think it through first. This of course has led me to other problems with members of society because some of the things that I do are “not normal” and tend to freak a lot of “normal” people out!

For entertainment I will see an occasional movie in a theatre, but unless I write down what the movie was about and if I liked it or not, I won't even remember that I had seen a movie. I would like to not have to go alone all the time, but the TBI has made friendships hard to make and keep. All of my friends from before the brain injury are long gone, and I can't blame them for not being around to support me, since I have changed so much since when they knew me and wanted to be my friend.

The funny thing about these different deficits of my TBI is that my long term memory is really good, so I remember how high functioning I used to be... I remember having and excelling at one of the toughest jobs in the world... an air traffic controller... and it honestly just frustrates me to no end that I can't do what I used to do.

III.

When I learned about the Defense Department grant being awarded to UCSD Medical Center, the hospital that saved my life, I was very happy. I know that with these funds UCSD can perform research to better understand TBI and can develop and deliver programs and services that will help people like me for the long run.

Unlike most other traumas where after surgery, recuperation and rehabilitation the patient can more or less start leading their normal lives again, TBI isn't measured in day, weeks, and months. It's an injury measured in years, decades, and lives. I hope that what comes out of this grant is more help for hidden brain injuries and more follow-up on how we as survivors are progressing with our various deficits.

I also hope that this grant can lead to more acceptance of TBI survivors and more understanding of their challenges. We want to contribute to society and we want to be accepted back into society, if only society will help make a place for us. It is not lost on me that this grant is coming from my former boss... the U.S. Military. My fellow veterans who have recently become TBI survivors, many from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, need to be helped better, longer and more innovatively. I have walked the road for the last 18 years that they are only now starting on. It is not an easy road, but with help promised by grants like this one, I know it'll be a little easier this time around.

Thank you for this opportunity to tell the story of a TBI survivor.