

BACK TO HEALTH

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The long road back

Recovering from a heart attack in November, **Patrick Cornish** reflects on the journey back to a normal life, facing psychological as well as physical hurdles

My gym group are all survivors, so now we get on with the business of reviving. We are half a dozen men who, having been treated for serious heart problems, are lifting weights as well as pushing, stepping up and pedalling in the hospital gym twice a week. And we chat. Exchange of grins and reminiscences is therapeutic in itself.

There is Ralph Pieri, who before Christmas collapsed at work "as if someone flicked off a switch" and was fortunate to have someone thump his chest as well as call an ambulance pronto. He's a 45-year-old father of three and a truck driver, so is extra lucky that the "flick" didn't come while he was behind the wheel. He hopes to go back to work soon, if only on light duties.

Graham Thorne, a 57-year-old with a brisk stride and ready smile, is a pace-setter on the

Physical aspects of this cardiac rehabilitation at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital are easy to examine and report on. Your pulse is a known quantity. You pedal at the fast rate, the machine's digital display tells you, for exactly two minutes. At the slow rate, for another two. "Go for five and two" says one of the wall posters, nudging the fruit-and-vegetable message. The scar on my leg from which veins were removed for the bypass sections is 36cm. The chest scar, from where they opened me up, is 21cm.

During the series of "knee extensions", designed to build leg muscle, my mind wanders to the psychological aspects of the drama that began on November 7. These are less measurable markers of progress — the "shadowlands" of rehab, difficult to bring into the light of rational assessment.

My own grey moments, unprofitable but inescapable, include glances at other men, on a

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10-minute walks that are part of our routine. He's a keen cyclist who aims to get back soon on the two wheels on which he used to ride about 20km a day.

Everyone's heart rates are measured between completing the walk and returning to the gym with our physiotherapist, Emma, who watches carefully while we're going through our paces outside. "Feeling OK," she asks the man who has just joined the group. "Tell me if you feel any pain at all in the chest."

bus, maybe, or in a shop, on TV, and envying their presumably flawless torso. I, at 62, feel that old age has hit me like a thunderbolt, instead of being ushered in gracefully as once imagined. I have difficulty getting to sleep after reading about the Christchurch earthquake victim who had a leg amputated amid the rubble. Now that is massive. My operation was done in optimum conditions.

The mental and emotional pressures were brought home to

me when agreeing to participate in a research program on depression among heart patients. I'm not the depressive type but then I used to think I was never the cardiac-risk type.

A few weeks after leaving hospital, I attended an education session at which a social worker discussed possible anxieties.

Professionals like her play a vital part in helping us cope with the next stage of life. "You're feeling fine but your family are worried?" They offer reassurance.

"Having trouble making sense of medical details — daily drugs, physical limitations, nutrition?" Information helps.

Patients like you, I'm told, can feel devastated and powerless. Social workers can give guidance, so the way ahead is less clouded. "You can rebuild. You can move away from the dark place."

In the gym, such thoughts mill around as I move from knee exercises to the 20 arm raises holding two 3kg weights. Ian Frizza, an engineer starting his

fast-pedal routine, is here because after feeling chest pain one day, he saw his GP who sent him straight to hospital. He had a stent for each of four artery blockages.

Extending my territory of recovery, I have joined Heart Support Australia, for former cardiac patients. Among its activities is sending members on hospital visits. I volunteered for the training but was told: "You need to have survived for a year." That's less than 250 sleeps. Then I can help someone else.



Physio: Patrick Cornish works out under the supervision of Emma diMarco.

Picture: Michael O'Brien

HEALTH+MEDICINE | THE PANEL



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