EPILEPSY NEW ZEALAND
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Harry's story



UNEXPECTED DEATH FROM EPILEPSY A SHOCK TO WHOLE FAMILY

For Mick and Kerry Overman, the speed at which their son's epilepsy progressed from mild to severe, with devastating consequences, will haunt them forever. Harry, aged just 19 in 2012, died as a result of a nocturnal tonic-clonic seizure, just four months after he had started having seizures.

"Harry was a healthy, typical 19-year-old. He was working and playing football for St Bernard's in the Victorian Amateur Football Association," says Harry's father, Mick, "which is why it was such a shock when he died suddenly."

"Harry started having absence seizures at just 19," he explained. "At the start they were mild, but they progressed in severity very quickly, within a matter of months. Then one night he had a major tonic-clonic seizure and we had to take him to the hospital. That started all the testing."

"While he was going through the testing, he had a few more tonic-clonic seizures. He had been working as a croupier at Crown Casino at the time, which probably wasn't the best environment for him, given the shift work, the late hours and lack of routine, which can be triggers for epilepsy."

"He actually had an appointment with the doctor to get his diagnosis, but the doctor was sick and cancelled the appointment."

"Then early one morning in August 2012, just four months after his first seizure, he came home from work around 4.00am. Sometime between then and 8.00am he had a severe seizure and he

was gone. He actually had another appointment scheduled for that morning to hear his diagnosis, but it was too late."

Following Harry's death, the Overmans have been frustrated that the Coroner would not make a finding of SUDEP (Sudden Unexpected Death in Epilepsy). "He would not say that Harry died from his epilepsy, as he had not yet been diagnosed. So SUDEP is not the reason given on his death certificate, but we know in our hearts that that's what it was."

Mick says Harry's unexpected and untimely death has had a devastating effect on the whole family, including his large, extended family. "Harry was the youngest of four children and one of 22 grandchildren; he was vivacious and a leader for the other kids, so it was hard on them too."

Harry's mother, Kerry, wants to get the message out that it's important to get diagnosed as quickly as possible, especially if the person having seizures is in the 18-24 age group. "We thought we had time, but we didn't. It was four months from when he started having seizures to when he died. We never even knew that death was a possibility, that epilepsy could be life-threatening."

"If you can get diagnosed as soon as you can, at least you can get the appropriate treatment and potentially avoid this kind of devastating consequence," she says.

Mick and Kerry have reached out to Epilepsy Foundation Australia since Harry's death and have attended the organisation's memorial services, for families and friends who've lost loved ones to epilepsy. "We've all had to deal with the grief," says Kerry. "The Foundation's services have helped us realise we are not the only ones who've lost someone to epilepsy."

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