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Janine Shepherd - recovery, resilience, and the power of healthcare staff

When Australian former cross country skier Janine Shepherd was lying paralysed in a spinal unit scared of an uncertain future, a simple act of kindness changed everything.

She'd commented on an orderly's novelty attire – a children's hospital gown with ducks on it. And so off he went and fetched her a couple – one with ducks and the other little teddy bears.

For the next six months in hospital she rotated those gowns. "And it gave me my humanity back," Janine says.

Suddenly, she was more than just a number, a patient to be prodded with a needle or given a pill at a certain time, and this profoundly aided in her recovery.

Janine will share her remarkable experience as a keynote speaker at this year's APAC Forum in Sydney. APAC Forum 2016 is themed Exploring New Frontiers and is presented by Auckland's Ko Awatea, with headline sponsors the Agency for Clinical Innovation (ACI) and the Clinical Excellence Commission.

Speaking to Ko Awatea via Skype from her new home in Wyoming, Janine promises her story of recovery and resilience has universal resonance.

In 1986 she was a serious contender for 1988 Winter Olympics until she was hit by a utility truck while training on her bicycle. Her injuries were catastrophic. She wasn't expected to ever walk again - and her Olympic career was instantly gone.

She did learn to walk again, not to mention fly, achieving her pilot's licence less than two years after being knocked over. Later, she married and had three children. But there were dark times in the weeks and months after her accident during which the connection with both health professionals who treated her with compassion and love, and fellow patients (who, because of her injuries, she couldn't see), meant everything.

"I had always lived a two dimensional life, doing what I wanted, achieving my dreams mixing with people who were athletes like me and suddenly I was put in this position where I had no control. I'd been run over, I'd had an accident and I was sharing a ward with people whose paths I never would have crossed with had I not been in that ward and it really cracked my heart open."

The question "why me?" was quickly replaced with a counter question "why not me?" she says.

"I was opened up to the fact that I was just like them [fellow patients]. We were all suddenly in this incredibly vulnerable domain where none of us knew what our future held.

"We all knew that we would be leaving with permanent disabilities. We'd all had our lives changed forever. And we all had the same hopes; we all wanted to find hope and fulfilment."

The Clinical Excellence Commission's (CEC) Director Patient Based Care Dr Karen Luxford said Janine's story highlighted many common issues and the need to include patients as part of the health team.

"The Clinical Excellence Commission has been working closely with public hospitals, patients and families to improve the safety and quality of care with a real focus on how we partner with patients," Dr Luxford said.

"Since the introduction of the Patient Based Care Challenge in 2013 we've seen strong uptake by NSW hospitals adopting strategies within this patient-centred model.

"The number of patient focussed strategies in place across the state's 16 Local Health Districts in 2013 sat at an average of four but by 2015 this had grown to about 20 by 2015.

"These strategies span the full range of health organisations from front line nurses and junior medical staff to executives and administration services. The strategies include things like consumer involvement in local quality improvement, active use of patient feedback to drive change and patient and family escalation of care - all making a real difference in the participation of patients, families and carers in health care."

Today, Janine is in the final stages of producing a US published book about her life, called *Defiant*. She lives with a new partner in a cabin in Wyoming when she is not travelling the world to speak.

She says APAC Forum 2016 delegates can expect a presentation rich in themes of connection, resilience and hope.

"When I stand on stage, I'm really vulnerable and really open," Janine says.

Though she is more or less in constant pain, retains only about 20 per cent feeling from the waist down, Janine says learning to accept her injuries and the different course her life would take, enabled her to reach and connect with others, which has been key to her remarkable story of recovery.

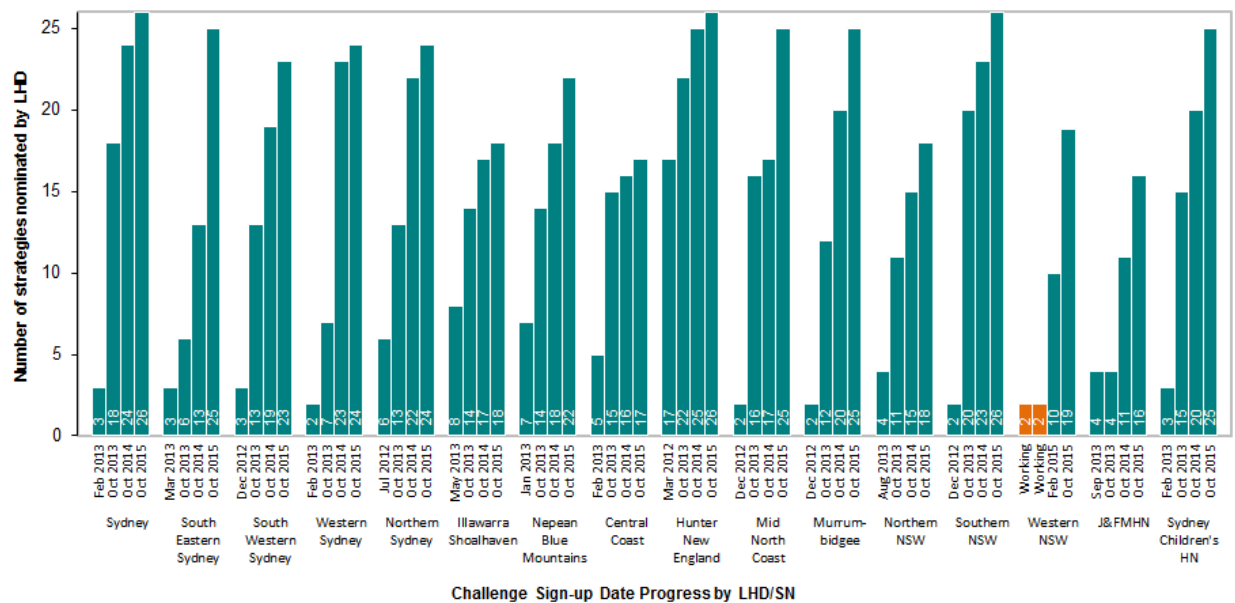
"I sort of crack open that shell that people have. I've sat in rooms and spoken to the toughest business men. I think a successful speaker is someone that can connect not just on

a cerebral level but also on a heart level. It is about reaching in and grabbing them by the heart strings and opening up for their own lives and their own journey.”

Editors notes:

Ko Awatea is a hub of education, improvement and innovation within Auckland’s Counties Manukau Health, supporting health systems and public services to improve population health.

To see how the patient based care challenge is rolling out in your local area visit the Clinical Excellence Commission’s echartbook. <http://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/echartbook/cec-indicators-intro-chartbook/patient-based-care#tabs-5>



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