



By *Josephine Brouard*

# Get well soon

Why is it that we have to be ill before we start appreciating how healthy we once were?

AS I LAY FLAT on my back, contemplating the ceiling of my ward during a recent ten-day stay in hospital for a knee-replacement operation, I thanked my lucky stars that I lived in Australia.

Despite all the bad press about our hospital services, I didn't experience anything but 100% professionalism for my entire stay. *Was it, I wonder, because I was in a private hospital being paid for by top cover medical insurance?*

Quite possibly. *But who wouldn't, I thought, pay to get that extra bit of comfort and TLC when you're sick and sore?* Here I was, after some 24 years, finally needing my top cover for something serious. And it saved me a fortune!

Even shelling out for the excess felt like a small price to pay when, after years of struggling with damaged knee cartilage, I made the decision to grasp the nettle and undergo one of life's less fun orthopaedic procedures. Thankfully, Australia is at the forefront when it comes to surgical procedures such as mine. I got a brand-new knee constructed from astonishingly strong plastic and was walking, virtually unaided, within days.

Not that the recovery, I confess, has been all wine and roses. There has been frustration, quite a lot of tears, and more restless nights (as I've struggled to wean myself off painkillers) than I care to repeat. And even now, several weeks since

my knee was sliced open, I find it hard, blue-chip treatment notwithstanding, to imagine myself ever walking normally again. And yet, apparently, I will. So I take it one day at a time, far more slowly than I'm accustomed to, and, in typical Pollyanna style – I can't help it, it's habitual – I tot up my blessings.

Blessing No.1 has been to realise what a wide and generous circle of family, friends and colleagues I have. They say the best thing you can have in times of stress is a good social network. Well, mine didn't hang back and, consequently, I had someone to lean on every step of the way. How can I adequately thank my pals for those cheering texts; visits; care packages; patient, therapeutic strolls and chats; lifts to and from work; not to mention countless thoughtful exchanges and errands all deferring to my temporary disability? In the compassionate friendship stakes, I am truly richer than an oil baron or an Emirates sheik!

Another blessing is the renewed sense of vulnerability you experience when dealing with "dis-ease" in whatever form. In my experience, a sense of your own frailty is neither to be avoided, nor feared. It tends to attune you to other people's suffering, and keeps you grounded, compassionate and real.

My operation catapulted me out of the humdrum of everyday life and made me ponder, briefly, a sense of my mortality.

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We all need to go there from time to time, and I did, reassessing my goals and priorities and emerging with a more focused view. My hero, Nelson Mandela, once said: "There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered." My operation doesn't compare with 27 years in prison, but it still achieved a sense of fresh vision.

Finally, the thing for which I am most grateful is my body's astonishing capacity to bounce back. That's a lot more than can be said of the millions of people all over the world who suffer diseases and conditions that cannot be cured, all the brilliant scientific minds notwithstanding.

There are people whom I love dearly who have been diagnosed with incurable ailments or conditions, and it breaks my heart to witness their pain. It also inspires me to see how my loved ones have risen to the challenge. Humbled afresh, I remind myself to wake up every day – and to give thanks for the fact that I can walk at all. ●

*Josephine Brouard has a psychology degree and a fascination for human behaviour.*