



Each of us has our own battle to fight. While some of us only encounter brief skirmishes with their health, others fight the long war. In July 2005 I waved the white flag of surrender on a 6 year battle – the enemy – my own body.

I was born with Arteriovenous Malformation (AVM) in my left forearm. An AVM is a tangle of abnormal blood vessels (arteries and veins). I wasn't aware of this birth defect until I was 7 years old. There is no cure for AVM, only surgical procedures to remove prominent or life threatening veins and vessels.

I had my first operation not long after the discovery. Basically, the doctors would cut out some of the blood vessel tangles and sew me back up. I had 4 operations during my childhood and for most of my young life the AVM was not an issue.

When I was 23, my 5th operation was instigated due to increasing and extended bouts of pain from the AVM. It was an embolisation procedure, which is a technique that involved injecting coils into some of the vessels. The coils, once inserted, irritate the walls of the veins. This makes the veins react in a protective way, covering over the coils and causing them to reduce the circumference of the more prominent veins.

I would never ever recommend this procedure to anyone. Until 2005, this was the most excruciating experience in my life. Post operative therapy lead to a Pressure Ulcer on my wrist. I lived with that ulcer for 2 years.

I had the travel bug and wasn't going to let anything get in the way of me seeing more of the world, not even a dodgy arm. So in October 2002 I packed up my life in Oz, strapped on my backpack and jumped on a plane. I spent two awesome months travelling the USA, and then (only because the money was dwindling) I came to the UK. My new life in London started off great, I was living in Covent Garden, meeting lots of new people and I started working at Shell Trading, a pub and in the west end theatres.

However, the pressure ulcer was not finished making a nuisance of itself. I was soon in hospital requiring emergency surgery. From February 2003 to July 2005 I was in hospital 8 times for 7 operations, which consisted of removal of the pressure ulcer, more blood vessel tangle removal, a skin graft and a thumb amputation. After a further few months of living a drugged zombie-like, pain filled existence, I admitted to myself there was no chance of recovery. My hand was dying. After a lot of soul-searching I asked the doctor to remove my left hand. He did.

I made a very quick recovery from the amputation operation and immediately began to enjoy my life again. I could not have done this alone and I want to say a big thank you to all my family and friends for their support. They were my lifeline to normality.

Since July 2005 I've had to learn a lot of new tricks to maintain a relatively "normal" life. Normal means different things to each person that reads this. To me normal describes a person who is whole and healthy.

After the last few years of hospitals and surgeries, I decided in 2006 that it was safe to get back on track with my working holiday plan.

I had been daydreaming about Greece for years. Pictures of Santorini haunted me in the dreariest days of the London winter. I splurged out on a 10 day all inclusive tour of Greece for my 30th birthday present to myself. It was end of tourist season and there were only 10 of us in the tour group. I had a fantastic time, starting in Athens, then island hopping to Paros, Mykonos, Santorini and then back to Athens.

Mykonos was a lovely island with beautiful sandy beaches and a picturesque village. The next island on the tour was Santorini. This is one very amazing place. Santorini was once a whole island until a volcano exploded. We stayed in Fira, which is perched on the edge of an impressive cliff and it has great panoramic views of the submerged volcano.

After Santorini it was a long ferry ride back to Athens. It's amazing the amount of fun you can have with a few decks of cards. We spent most of the 8 hour journey up on the deck having a riot of a time with silly card games. It was one of the more memorable, hilarious parts of the tour.

In December I went to Zimbabwe for 10 days with some friends. A lot of the friends I have here in the UK grew up in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. I spent a few days in Harare where one of my friend's family has a home. For the first few days I couldn't shake the feeling that I was in Australia somewhere. The streets were lined with blooming Jacaranda trees and in my friend's front yard there were gum trees, lantana, gardenia and frangipani trees. There were many hours spent eating bbq'd food, swimming in the pool and being shown all the places I have heard stories about over the last few years.

2 of my friends and I went on a 4 day trip to Victoria Falls. The falls are called "Mosi-oa-Tunya" the smoke that thunders. David Livingstone, a Scottish explorer, visited the falls in 1855 and renamed them after Queen Victoria. The falls are part of two national parks, Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park in Zambia and Victoria Falls National Park in Zimbabwe.

On arriving my friends and I booked ourselves onto a heap of activities. We spent the first night on a sunset river cruise of the Zambezi River, above the falls. We saw crocodiles, hippos, impalas and elephants, as well as a beautiful sunset.

The second day in Victoria Falls was spent on a white water rafting adventure on the Zambezi. It was fun and memorable experience. 21km of 25 different graded rapids. I did very well for myself through all the graded rapids, until I fell out on a 'freebie' rapid (which is basically not a rapid) and got squished between two rafts.

My friends and I bungee jumped. The free fall was a weird sensation and before you get a chance to get used to it, you are being yanked hard by the ankles back up the way you came. When you look up to see where you are going, you start to fear that you are going to bounce back into the underside of the bridge. I bounced on the end of that cord for too long for my liking. Not to mention the pendulum swing that begins after the second bounce, I alone also experienced spinning on top of the other two sensations. (I think this is because I am unbalanced because I am missing a hand. The other two didn't experience the spin.) I think I was in a state of shock a few hours after that jump. I won't ever do a bungee jump again. I might consider skydiving, at least it's a continuous drop.

Once I recovered from the shock we then did a night safari on a private reserve, which was a bouncy trip in an open jeep driving around the dirt tracks of the park. The safari started in the late afternoon while there was plenty of light. The base camp had a troop of baboons and a family of wart hogs there to greet us. The driver headed towards the river and on the way we saw many different types of antelope, bushbuck, waterbuck, kudu, and impala. We saw zebras, which the driver/guide calls disco donkeys. I also had the opportunity to meet 4 rhino's that were acclimatising to their new home. We got to touch them all. I was disappointed that, despite hearing them, I didn't see any of the big cats.

The last day in Victoria Falls was finished off with a helicopter ride. The helicopter circled the falls, we got to see where we had been the last few days and also we had now been to the falls at different levels – Air, land and water. I was very reluctant to get on the plane back to London.

These adventures have shown me that, if you are determined not to let things stop you, just about anything is possible. In my case the old saying is definitely true ‘where there’s a will, there’s a way’. I look forward to being challenged to find a different way to do things. I do not describe myself as disabled, just inconvenienced.

*AVMs can occur anywhere in the body; however brain (also known as cerebral) AVMs are of special concern because of the damage they can cause when they bleed. They are very rare and occur in less than 1% of the general population.*

*gffThe cause is not known. AVMs are thought to be due to abnormal development of blood vessels during fetal development. An AVM is not inherited or infectious. An AVM is not a cancer, which means that it cannot spread to other parts of the body.*

*Dural AVMs are an exception in that they may be caused by injury. AVMs can occur in people of any race or sex in almost equal proportions.*

*<http://www.avmsupport.org.uk/index.php>*