

# Back to a bright future for Norfolk patient

**Helen Culling** discusses the astonishing recovery of Norfolk patient Shayelle Fulcher after recent spinal surgery at Spire Norwich Hospital.



**W**alking, shopping, working, driving and having a shower are routine tasks most people, may take for granted. These were all day to day activities 26-year-old Shayelle Fulcher could perform just six months ago with ease. However a niggling back pain last summer led to four months of frequent GP visits, medication, time off work and debilitating symptoms leaving her bed-bound until she was referred to Consultant Spinal Surgeon, Mr Am Rai.

Many of us have suffered back pain at some point in our lives, it is one of the most common reasons for people being signed off work. However Shayelle's condition was something very different and I asked her to explain her symptoms.

"At the beginning of August 2011, I had several pains in my lower back. I did not take these pains seriously and continued my daily routine as normal. However just two or three weeks later, things started to get worse. A five-minute walk to the bus stop was becoming 15 minutes. Along with the pains, my lower back started to spasm and over the next few days I experienced numbness down the lower left side of my body."

Shayelle continues: "It was at this point I thought I should visit my GP. I was signed off work for two weeks with sciatica [back pain/discomfort resulting from irritation of the largest nerve in the body]. I was prescribed painkillers and was placed on the waiting list for an MRI scan"

Shayelles' quality of life deteriorated

dramatically over the next few weeks. Shayelle was unable to walk or leave the house unaided and within weeks, she was walking bent over at a 90-degree angle.

Into October Shayelle had her first session of physiotherapy, in the hope this would improve her symptoms.

Shayelle recalls: "Physiotherapy helped initially as I was provided with crutches taking the pressure off my lower back. The physiotherapists were able to show me techniques which temporarily relieved my pain and back spasms. However without an MRI scan, they were unable to manipulate [apply pressure by massaging] the area. At this point the painkiller medication had increased and as I was getting just two hours sleep each night because of the pain I was also prescribed sleeping tablets".

Shayelle was signed off work throughout this time and finally underwent her MRI scan in October.

"I was so pleased because I wanted to know exactly what was causing all this pain and what turned me from a normal, mobile person into someone who couldn't stand up straight or could barely walk"

The MRI results showed that Shayelle had one lumbar disc prolapse. The discs in our spine, to some extent, act as shock absorbers and cushion the spine to allow a good range of movement. A healthy disc is largely full of water but with age the disc can degenerate and therefore its normal function is affected. A healthy disc allows flexion and extension (bending

forwards and backwards), lateral flexion (sideways movement) and twisting. However a combination of stresses and indeed the genetic composition of the disc can damage this area which then can lead to pain. On occasion a piece of disc can move and cause pressure on the nerve which can be the cause back and severe leg pain (sciatica).

After Shayelles diagnosis in November she was referred to Consultant Spinal Surgeon, Mr Am Rai. Mr Rai's practice is broad based including all aspects of spinal pathology. He specialises in minimally invasive spinal surgery. He recalls seeing Shayelle for the first time. "I was astounded at Shayelle's posture. She was walking like an old woman as opposed to someone of 26. It was a shame to see such a young woman in so much discomfort, particularly as there was a simple solution. Shayelle had failed all conservative management and a relatively straightforward minimally invasive operation to trim the disc was the key to her recovery in this instance."

Mr Rai operated on Shayelle within a week of seeing her. Shayelle had a significant disc prolapse which was causing pressure on the nerve which caused her to bend forward and develop the posture of an older person. The surgical procedure is performed through a small incision and the disc is trimmed. A lot of patients are able to go home on the same day and, in approximately 90 per cent of patients, the pain relief is almost instant.

Shayelle concludes: "Without the operation, I dread to think about the quality of my life. The fact is a few months ago, I was unable to do simple tasks such as bathing, getting out of bed, going to the toilet and undertaking any basic household chores were impossible. You can clearly see on the footage Mr Rai took how debilitating my symptoms had become." See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c01TvGrZEIY>

Shayelle is recovering well. Although it is rare for patients' to deteriorate so rapidly and severely, Mr Rai's advice would be that the vast majority of patients improve with conservative treatment but there are a proportion who require specialist treatment within a short period of time. In selected patients the results of surgery can be very gratifying and indeed if you compare the video of Shayelle's pre- and post-op posture (approximately one week apart) one can see the difference that a simple operation can have on a patient's quality of life.

Shayelles post-operative transformation can be viewed on youtube using this link:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1tUYEx0gA8>.

**Nightmare situation: Even basic tasks such as shopping can be painful with a bad back – but a recent patient at Spire Hospital Norwich exhibited much more startling symptoms.**

**Should you require further information about the spinal surgery services available to you locally, please contact Spire Norwich Hospital on 01603 255614 or visit [www.spirenorwich.com](http://www.spirenorwich.com). The content of this page is provided for general information only. It should not be treated as a substitute for the professional medical advice of your doctor or other healthcare professional.**

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