

MOLLY'S STORY:

From typist to Allied health.

I was 26 and had been enjoying my career in a small business for the past 5 years when I had a sudden increase in my typing workload over a couple of months. Shortly afterwards, I suddenly developed sharp pain in my wrists, and my hands and forearms became very swollen. I sought treatment from a physiotherapist and myotherapist immediately and after about two months of ultrasound treatment and dry needling, as well as anti-inflammatory medication the swelling finally settled.

The pain however persisted and expanded to my forearms, upper arms, shoulders and upper trapezius. I had six weeks off work and continued treatments, before returning to work on modified duties. I started out with 5 minutes per day of typing, and gradually increased to 20 minutes per day of typing.

I initially resisted making a Workcover claim, as I had hoped that with treatment the condition would resolve quickly. I was also very worried about the stigma that still surrounds Workcover and didn't want anyone to think less of me. Over time, though, the treatments began to add up and we couldn't afford to keep paying for them on our own. About 3 months after the symptoms set in, I reluctantly spoke to my employer about making a Workcover claim. They seemed fine with it and everything went through smoothly. They accepted liability for the condition and were very supportive.

Unfortunately that didn't last very long, and once the claim was accepted, they stopped paying my wages. They advised me that as the claim had been accepted, Workcover would take over paying my wages, and Workcover advised me that my employer would need to continue paying my wages and be reimbursed by Workcover. The arguments went on for 6 months, with the insurer ignoring me when I continuously advised them that my employer was refusing to pay, and my employer ignoring my pleas for them to pay me. At the time, I was working just five hours a day.

We racked up debt on our credit card paying for weekly physiotherapy and myotherapy treatments for 6 months without my income, and at that point I had exhausted myself trying to deal with the situation without losing my temper. I made an official complaint to Worksafe about my employer for refusing to pay me and my insurer for refusing to deal with it. I also made a complaint to the Fair Work Ombudsman. Within days both agencies had advised my employer of the complaint and threatened them with large fines if they did not pay me the past 6 months worth of wages plus interest. This was the point at which I finally started to receive weekly payments directly from the insurer as the employer could not be trusted to follow through with their responsibilities.

I continued with treatments while I worked part time on modified duties, and tried Feldenkrais along with the physiotherapy and myotherapy. I did the Feldenkrais for 6 months before stopping as I felt I wasn't making any progress and it wasn't for me. There were many sets of stretches and exercises from the doctors that I had to do several times a day at home and at work. I disliked doing them at work as my employer would often walk past and make jokes about how silly I looked doing particular arm stretches. I kept up a happy face at work and didn't discuss my health or Workcover issues with any of my coworkers as I was afraid of them thinking less of me being on Workcover, or taking my employers side. Eventually they did find out and, thankfully, were very kind about it. They were also quite appalled at how our employer had treated me.

After stopping the Feldenkrais, my musculoskeletal specialist suggested some trigger point injections into my upper trapezius. These were rather painful; it involved injecting the needle into a tender spot, then wriggling the needle around until it hit the trigger point. Then the trigger point was injected with a local anaesthetic. I found this gave me some pain relief in the upper trapezius but unfortunately didn't make any difference to my wrists or arms.

Twelve months after I developed OOS my employer made me redundant as there was no work available without a large amount of typing involved, and I was only able to do one hour per day of typing by that stage.

I continued with the physiotherapy, myotherapy and home exercises, as well as things I could do to self-manage pain at home, such as ice when swelling cropped up intermittently, heat packs and hot Epsom salts baths for the pain, as well as using a TENS machine. I was able to purchase a TENS machine through my private health insurance with no out-of-pocket costs. I was also given a "spiky ball" by my myotherapist, which is excellent for self massage, as with RSI and OOS you can't use one injured hand to massage your other injured hand! I also got approval from Workcover to do a three month gym program where I used the treadmill and exercise bikes. I felt a little better when I was more active, but couldn't afford the gym fees after the 3 month program finished. Now I ride my bike regularly and find it eases some of my pain. I had to get a bike that has an upright seating position so there is no strain on my wrists.

After my redundancy I spent three or four months researching options for a change of career, as my doctors had advised that any work in the field I was in before was out of the question now I had OOS. I had always liked the idea of working in health and helping people, and kept this in mind when looking at possibilities. I worked with my occupational therapist, myotherapist, musculoskeletal specialist and GP to think of retraining options, and after a few false starts we found that I could retrain in Allied Health Assistance. My doctors and I all submitted reasons why I should be permitted to retrain in this area, and eventually it was

approved. I found a part-time course that allowed me to spread the study over the week so I wasn't overdoing it, and there was no typing involved in the course. I really enjoyed retraining and my placement and successfully gained a new qualification.

I have applied for a number of jobs since qualifying, with the assistance of a rehabilitation consultant. Unfortunately their policy was to make the prospective employer aware of the injury and Workcover claim at the application stage, and I believe that contributed to my resume being dropped to the bottom of the pile and not progressing to interview stage. That Workcover stigma is still difficult to get past with a lot of employers. I experimented with one and didn't mention it in my application. I got called in for an interview and advised them of it during the interview but wasn't successful. At this stage I am trying to gain recent experience in health through volunteering, in the hopes that it may lead to employment in the future.

I still have difficulties everyday with housework and daily activities. I often get a flare-up in pain from silly little things such as giving my cats a pat or picking them up, but I have improved a lot in the past 3 years. In the beginning I had to rely on my husband to do most things for me. Opening doors, jars and bottles, cooking, picking things up and carrying things for me, buttoning up my clothes and zippers, and all of the housework was left to him. He has been an enormous support with daily tasks as well as emotionally and I don't know how I would have gotten through without his help. Now I can wash the dishes and clean the kitchen and bathroom, and with the assistance of many new kitchen gadgets I can cook and bake most things I used to. I still need help with some tasks and there are a few things that I can't do at all like mopping the floors and filling the car with petrol. Thankfully my husband is very understanding and helps with those things when I need him to, but recognises that I need to regain as much independence as possible so doesn't try to do "everything" for me. I am finding so much helpful information and support from the RSI and Overuse Injury Association since I have joined, in particular the 'Pregnancy and Parenting with RSI Handbook' has given us really helpful tips and more importantly, has given us hope that we will manage with children one day in the future despite the RSI.