Putting the Pieces Together After Brain Injury

By Patricia McNulty

Newsflash—July 25, 2001
A car driven by 20-year-old Amber Wooten of Covington was struck today by a train at a local railroad crossing. The impact threw Amber from the car. Amber’s six-month-old daughter Ashley, buckled into her car seat, survived without injury. Paramedics on the scene knew Amber’s injuries were too severe for treatment at a local hospital. Without hesitation, they called for the Miami Valley Hospital air ambulance, CareFlight. Their quick action got Amber to the care she needed at MVH—the region’s only Level I Trauma Center.

Fast forward to June 2007. Amber Wooten, survivor of traumatic brain injury, has just received her associate’s degree from Edison State Community College in Piqua, Ohio. Daughter Ashley is an active six-year-old, who is knee-deep in the delights of summer. Looking at Amber now, one would find it hard to imagine her long struggle to rebuild her life.
Today, Amber Wooten has no recollection of the accident that nearly took her life. But she does remember the many caring people at MVH who not only saved her life but also put her on the road to a more fulfilling life.

One of those people is Michael Pedoto, MD, a physiatrist [pronounced fiz-i’-a’trist], who specializes in physical medicine and rehabilitation. Dr. Pedoto is the director of the Rehabilitation Institute of Ohio’s (RIO) Brain Injury Program at MVH. He is also medical director of the HIRE program and assistant clinical professor of orthopedics at Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine.

Dr. Pedoto remembers Amber very well. “When CareFlight brought Amber to the hospital, the trauma team went into action immediately to evaluate her injuries and get her medically stabilized. Once that was accomplished, she was transferred to an acute care unit, where she spent three weeks. Amber then entered our Inpatient Rehabilitation Unit—a part of RIO—where she remained for several more weeks. During her hospital stay, Amber began intensive physical, speech and occupational therapies. The inpatient rehabilitation specialists also helped Amber relearn basic self-care: bathing, toileting and dressing herself.”

As is the case with most patients who have sustained traumatic brain injury, Amber’s need for special care didn’t end when she left the hospital. Her second major step toward recovery was to enter MVH’s Comprehensive Outpatient Rehabilitation Program (CORP)—also a part of RIO—where she continued her therapies through September and October 2001.

“While the goal of our inpatient rehabilitation program is to get patients like Amber ready to go home, the goals of CORP are to help patients regain the higher-level skills that will enable them to return to independent living and to their pre-injury pursuits—such as attending school, returning to work, or caring for a home and children. Amber was one of the most motivated patients we’ve had,” Dr. Pedoto says.

Road to Rehabilitation

As Amber Wooten progressed through inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation at MVH, her self-confidence slowly began to surface. So did her determination. Backed by the support of staff members at MVH and by her mother, Diane Litton, Amber decided to apply for admission to HIRE—a comprehensive return-to-work program for people with cognitive injuries.

The Ohio Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation funds client admission to HIRE. Staffed by Miami Valley Hospital, HIRE is the only program of its kind in Ohio. While the program is part of RIO, it is located off-campus at 360 S. Main Street, about one mile north of MVH.

William Arnold, PhD, clinical neuropsychologist and clinical director of HIRE, describes the program: “HIRE is an intense in-house clinic designed to prepare patients to return successfully to the everyday work world. Patients are with us Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., anywhere from three to six months.

“During that time, patients enter our ‘real-work’ environment, where they are expected to behave as responsible employees and perform normal job requirements. Tasks include arriving on time, signing in and out, behaving in a professional manner, and performing a variety of job-related tasks.”
an acceptable on-the-job manner, following instructions carefully and communicating with others.”

HIRE occupational therapist Pam Kaneshige, OTR/L, smiles when she recalls working with Amber. “She was one of the most determined patients we’ve ever seen. She worked hard to overcome her cognitive deficits and to learn new skills.”

At first, Amber’s goal was to be able to return to her previous job as a waitress. But as she progressed through the HIRE program, she sharpened her academic skills and gained the confidence to set higher goals, including attending college. “All of us at HIRE worked to help her realize that it could happen,” recalls Pam. “Our program is tough and demanding. Many people don’t make it as far as Amber did. But, thanks to her own efforts and to great support from her family, Amber took on every challenge we gave her. She just never gave up.” After Amber finished the program, the HIRE staff kept in touch and offered ongoing support.

Amber Wooten remembers gratefully the many people at MVH and HIRE who kept her moving from one step to the next until she achieved a truly remarkable recovery. “I am so thankful for the professionals who pushed, encouraged and supported me all those long months,” Amber says. “Without them—and my mother—I could never have gone to Edison State or taken care of Ashley properly. I have been truly blessed.”

For more information about the treatment of brain-injured patients at MVH, call Kathy Stachowski, team manager, Inpatient Rehabilitation and HIRE, at (937) 208-4180.

MVH’s Rehabilitation Services

Treating brain-injured patients like Amber Wooten is one of the many services Miami Valley Hospital’s Rehabilitation Institute of Ohio offers to seriously disabled patients. Amber experienced the full spectrum of RIO services:

• Acute care therapies
• Inpatient rehabilitation
• Comprehensive Outpatient Rehabilitation Program (CORP)
• HIRE program

RIO is a regional center designed for the treatment of those with disabling conditions. One of the nation’s largest physical medicine departments based in a community hospital, RIO at MVH is staffed by a team of medical specialists and more than 100 other health professionals, who provide comprehensive inpatient and outpatient services. The goal of RIO is to help patients return to their families and communities with the skills needed to function at the highest possible level.

RIO has successfully helped seriously injured patients in a variety of programs, including:

• Spinal cord injury
• Brain injury
• Stroke rehabilitation

RIO offers patients physical, occupational, speech and recreational therapies, as well as the use of a transitional apartment to prepare them to return to independent living. In addition to the CORP and HIRE outpatient programs, RIO offers outpatient physical therapy, sports medicine and hand therapy services at selected satellite locations in Kettering, Centerville, Beavercreek, Dayton, Vandalia and Springboro.