

Hotelier's 'solitary confinement' revealed in fundraising book

Three years ago Robin Sheppard had the world at his feet.

Having run the Bath Spa and French hotels, he was co-owner of Combe House Manor Hotel and the entrepreneur behind the Bespoke Hotel company.

Then, one December day, he quite simply collapsed.

Unable to move a muscle, he was only saved by the fortuitous visit of a neighbour who dialled 999. Critically

Graham Holburn

g.holburn@bathchron.co.uk

ill, he was taken to the Royal United Hospital where he was to spend the next seven months.

Mr Sheppard had fallen victim to the little-known Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS), which affects some 1,500 people a year nationally.

It is a disease of the nervous system that prevents nerves in the arms and legs from working.

Now Mr Sheppard, who is still far from over his illness, has written about his ordeal in a book called *A Solitary Confinement*. All proceeds from the book are going to the GBS Society to help fight the illness and raise funds for more research.

The book has already made it to the number one spot on Amazon UK.

It was written using voice-activated software, as Mr Shepherd is still unable to use his hands. He has movement in his knuckles but his hands and feet feel like they are "wrapped in barbed wire and encased in oven gloves".

But the pain is something Mr Shepherd has become accustomed to and now barely notices.

In those first few days, though, it was excruciating as virtually his entire body packed up, leaving him unable to breathe on his own.

His recovery has been a long process. "GBS doesn't just stand for the Guillain-Barré Syndrome," he says. "It also means 'Get Better Slowly'."

It is typical of the humour that laces his book. "I have been accused of writing a series of gags but laughter is my safety valve," he says. "In fact, writing the book has been an utterly cathartic experience. It's what the Americans call 'externalising'."

Mr Shepherd, who now lives in Fulham, West London, is full of praise for the way friends and family have stood by him throughout his ordeal.

He says his two sons, 21-year-old Sam, and Charlie, 19, found it particularly hard initially to talk to him about his condition, but "after time that becomes easier". In fact, Charlie has produced the artwork for the cover of the book.

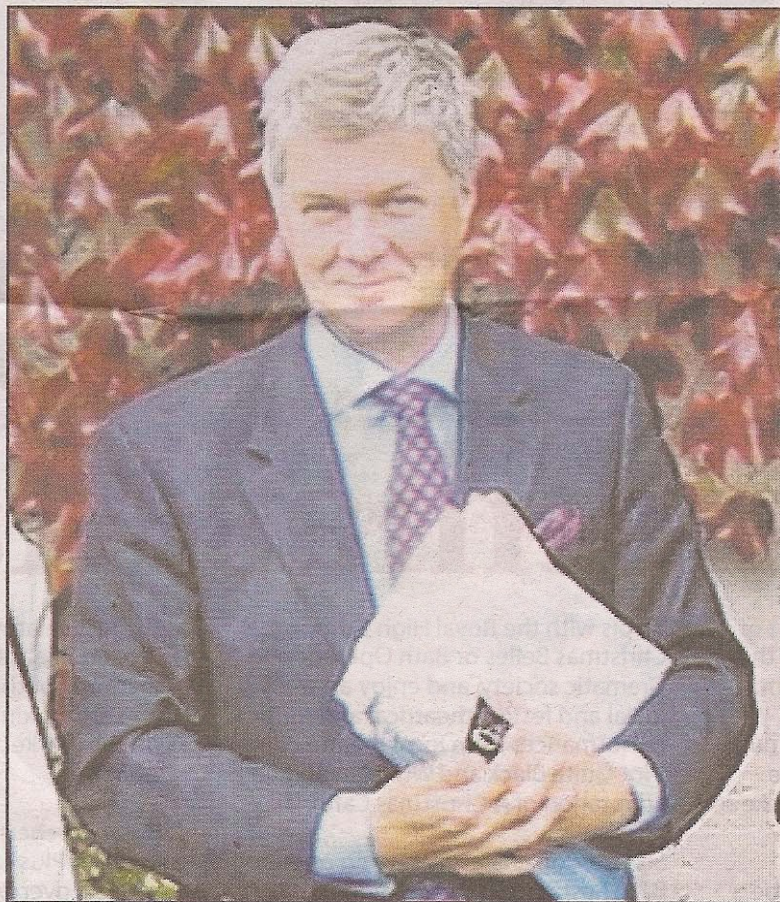
But it is for the staff at the RUH that Mr Shepherd reserves particular praise. "After all the criticism the RUH has had to endure over the years, I have to say the level of care and attention I received there was outstanding."

It is difficult to predict how great a recovery Mr Shepherd will make, as GBS is such an unpredictable illness but he is "taking it one week at a time".

He is still working for Bespoke Hotels but no longer in a managerial capacity, concentrating more on the marketing side.

And he still occasionally returns to Bath to see old friends, though not as often as he would like. However, now he has been given the go-ahead to start driving again he could make the journey down the M4 more frequently.

● To order a copy of the book, go to



HOTEL CHIEF: Robin Sheppard pictured two years before he was struck down

GBS fact file

What is GBS?

It is an acute disease of the peripheral nervous system in which the nerves in the arms and legs become inflamed and stop working. This causes sudden weakness leading to limb paralysis, and a loss of sensation, sometimes with pain.

Who can get GBS?

Anyone: young or old, male or female. The illness is neither hereditary nor contagious.

What causes GBS?

This is a matter of much research. About 60 per cent of patients suffer from a throat or intestinal infection, influenza or stress symptoms in the two weeks before the GBS attacks. These infections trigger an incorrect response in the immune system which attacks the nerves.

What are the symptoms?

First symptoms are usually tingling and numbness in the fingers and toes with progressive weakness in the arms and legs during the next few days. In the mildest of cases, the weakness may arrest and cause only moderate difficulty in walking, requiring sticks, crutches or a walking frame.

In some cases the weakness progresses and leads to complete paralysis of the legs. The arms may also be affected. In a quarter of cases the paralysis progresses up the chest and the patient is unable to breathe on his or her own and needs to rely on a ventilator. The throat and face may be affected making swallowing impossible and so the patient needs to be fed by tube up the nose or directly into the stomach.

Do all patients recover?

Most patients (80 per cent) make a total recovery but many spend three months or more in hospital and take a year to recover. Some patients do not recover completely and have residual weakness, numbness and occasional pain. A small number are unable to resume their normal occupation. Modern intensive care makes death from GBS a rare occurrence but it does occur in around five per cent of cases, mostly in the elderly.

Links...

www.gbs.org.uk