

AUSTRALIAN DOCTOR NEWS

# 'My wheelchair is my prison and my freedom,' says GP with quadriplegia

After a catastrophic accident four years ago, Dr Steve Peterson has found ways to work as a GP and support rural communities

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Dr Steve Peterson's colleagues were wondering why he had not turned up as they were preparing for the arrival of a major trauma case at their ED.

It was only when they saw the critically injured cyclist who came in that they understood — it was because he was the patient.

He had been struck by a motorist while riding to work at the hospital in the regional town of Orange, NSW.

He had fractured every bone in his neck, dissected his vertebral artery and seriously damaged his spinal cord at the base of his neck.



**Dr Steven Peterson.**

"I was just a small cog in emergency as one of the registrars, but there was a major trauma coming in, and they definitely wanted to know where I was," Dr Peterson recounts to *Australian Doctor*.

"It wasn't normal for me to be late to work. Anyway, sure enough, I made it," he says.

The doctors found a complete spinal lesion at the fourth-highest vertebra, C4, resulting in the permanent loss of the use of his legs, torso and almost all his arm function.

**As Australian Doctor has previously reported**, he spent a total of 69 days in ICU and seven months recovering in hospital.

The story here is his remarkable return.

Four years later, Dr Peterson — a father of two young boys aged six and eight — talks about his life working as a GP.

After much trial and error, Dr Peterson now divides his time between face-to-face work at an Orange drug and alcohol addiction service and telehealth supporting EDs in regional NSW.

He's on the remote GP service roster for Rural and Remote Medical Services telehealth and is a virtual rural generalist with Murrumbidgee Local Health District.

It has been a tough road emotionally and physically, but he believes he is making a contribution to rural communities and the GPs who live there.

"I'm a GP with more emergency experience than most, so I think I am well suited for this telehealth role," he said.

"And it's a role where quadriplegia is almost no impairment at all.

"It's not a charity role, you know, a job just to be kind.

"It's a job like any other."

Dr Peterson wanted to get back to work as soon as he could after the accident.

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Shortly after returning home to Orange following his months in hospital, he started work at the drug and alcohol centre he had been with before the accident, but it was an inauspicious start, which flagged some of the challenges ahead.

"I remember the first day back at detox because unfortunately I couldn't get up the wheelchair ramp, which ends in a step probably due to poor construction," he said.

"So you had to get another ramp and balance it over the top of that ramp so that I could get in.

"It's been such an unusual few years. There's always new equipment, new wheelchairs, new carers, even a new house at one stage.

"So a new job, trying something new, that's been part of the process, I guess."

He said he did some face-to-face general practice but found he was relying too much on colleagues during examinations.

Now, with telehealth, Dr Peterson says he feels as though he is making a contribution as he can take the pressure off GPs in small towns and can supply medical support where resources are limited.

And in some cases, he feels he is almost able to form a better relationship because of his own experiences.



*Dr Peterson working from home.*

“When patients see me in a wheelchair, they’re not entirely sure what to make of me, and that can sometimes give me an ‘in,’” he says.

“I’ve found that some of the patients who might be a bit cranky or aggressive can be a bit kinder to me.

“And sometimes that can be the opening to a good relationship.

“My wheelchair is my prison and my freedom both.”

Voice recognition technology helps when typing medical notes and a device used with his mouth aids him to use computers.

“Often it’s the little things: I need the door opened, and I need the computer turned on and such things, but we get by.”

He's a man with rare energy and spirit.

After a successful campaign last year, he's now also been elected as an Orange councillor and is helping with research on quadriplegia with Griffith University, which takes him to the Gold Coast in Queensland for around five days every fortnight.

His accident changed his world, but in some ways, medicine has been a constant.

“I'm grateful to be alive because it was not a guarantee at all. I'm grateful I don't have a brain injury, so I can still work and have a relationship with my wife and children and the like.

“Each month, it gets a little better as we develop solutions to things.”

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