



Photograph courtesy of the BBC

Darek Fidyka initiating leg movement, walking across a bridge during the BBC's *Panorama*, October 2014

Nicholls Spinal Injury Foundation

Groundbreaking advances in the potential treatment of those suffering spinal cord injuries brings hope to thousands across the UK and millions across the world who are living with the condition

Polo Times caught up with Mike Milner, CEO of the Nicholls Spinal Injury Foundation on 26 May at their annual fundraiser at Guards Polo Club, to hear about the pioneering research funded by the Nicholls Spinal Injury Foundation.

The research NSIF funds attempts to restore function to severed areas of the spinal cord and actually repair damaged fibre tracts. This is done through a surgical procedure which transplants special cells (olfactory ensheathing cells) from the patient's own olfactory system, located in the nose into the site of injury. These act as a bridge over which the damaged connections can grow back. So far this is showing remarkable promise.

For the first time in history, a team of British and Polish scientists have recorded the reconnection of severed long spinal nerve fibres in one patient, Darek Fidyka in 2014. This has huge implications for the future of research and treatment of spinal injury. Through cell transplantation surgery, followed by intensive rehabilitation over a period of more than two years, the scientists NSIF



Photograph courtesy of Wyojarcza

Darek Fidyka using an adapted tricycle, BBC News March 2016

supports have been able to restore assisted walking and some sensation to Darek. At the moment, there are indications of improvement in bladder, bowel and sexual function. These are under investigation. There are encouraging signs, but the scientists cannot be certain at this point where these will lead.

How has the medical world reacted to the work of NSIF?

"I think broadly the reaction we've seen of the medical world through the press

has been positive but cautious. We always knew that proving this concept would require more than one patient. This is why we are funding the Walk Again Project in Poland, to prove that Darek's recovery is not a one off."

What are the major issues facing NSIF at the moment?

"The biggest issue facing NSIF right now is that the clinical work in Poland is expanding, which has roughly doubled our funding needs. We are of course thrilled that the Polish team is looking for more patients for the Walk Again Project – it's all happening because the first patient Darek showed amazing progress. But it means we need to raise more money than ever before over the next three years."

What is the current status of the Walk Again Project?

"The search for two more patients is ongoing. It's a lengthy process because the conditions in the patients need to replicate as closely as possible the conditions in Darek in terms of the injury. By treating patients that are as similar as possible, the scientists minimize the chance that there could be any other factor at work influencing the recovery. It's also important to find someone who is dedicated to the rehabilitation process and willing to work very hard at that after the procedure. This is essential in terms of realising the benefits from the surgery. Darek is inspiring in that respect."

Why is the charity relevant to polo?

"Spinal cord injury is sometimes called a hidden cause. It affects around 40,000 people in the UK, but unless you know someone affected the chances are you won't fully understand the impact on a person's life, or the lives of those closest to them. It's far more than not being able to walk; it can totally take away someone's independence. I think polo players and horse riders generally understand why curing spinal injury would be so life changing, because many have unfortunately seen the devastation caused by paralysis through someone they know, or have heard of it happening to someone." ❌

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