



17 Jun 2017

Dominion Post Weekend, Wellington

Author: Nikki MacDonald • Section: Insight • Article type : News Item • Audience : 96,325  
Page: 1 • Printed Size: 2419.00cm<sup>2</sup> • Market: NZ • Country: New Zealand • Words: 1253  
Item ID: 794124030

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**Karen Langvad-Forster suffered delayed concussion after falling while getting off a bike. Six months on, she is still recovering.**

PHOTO: ROBERT KITCHIN/FAIRFAX NZ

**About 35,000 Kiwis suffer mild brain injuries every year. Most are not on the sports field. Nikki Macdonald investigates their hidden toll.**

### Non-sport concussion

**T**he first thought that entered Karen Langvad-Forster's bleeding head was "I hope no-one saw that".

The second was to wonder if she'd popped her ear-drum, so great was the force when her head thwacked the edge of the terracotta flower pot as she fell.

She never considered concussion. She hadn't been knocked out, seen stars or staggered around like a Saturday



night drunk.

The 52-year-old emergency department nurse had been trying out a friend's electric bike. Dismounting on the driveway, she hooked her foot and went to ground, splitting her ear through to the cartilage on the way.

"It felt like someone had come up behind me and put their hands there [around her ears] and slapped them together."

Her friend drove her to the Hutt Hospital emergency department to have her ear glued back together. Typical nurse, she said her brain was perfectly fine. No-one asked

any concussion questions and she went home for technology-free rest.

Langvad-Forster doesn't remember driving back to work two days later. Or the handover of patient notes. She remembers vomiting and ringing fellow ED nurse and concussion guru Doug King, who diagnosed delayed concussion. Banned from driving, she called home in Palmerston North and asked to be picked up.

"I remember my daughter shouting at me over the phone – I can't understand you, hand me over to Doug."

She vomited all the way home and slept for two days. She struggled with memory, words and eyesight. Her dreams were a crazy cornucopia of unrelated childhood fragments, as if "your filing cabinet of memories has been thrown up in the air and while you sleep it's trying to refile things".

She was off work for 20 days. Six months on, she's still renting a cottage overlooking Wellington Harbour so she doesn't have to drive home after her hospital shift.

"When I got in the car for the first time to drive back to work, I had to stop three times. I was

nauseous and knackered when I got there. I used to do a shift, drive straight home to Palmerston North and not even bat an eyelid. Now I can't do that.

"I'm getting better, but it's such a slow grind."

**L**angvad-Forster is one of about 35,000 Kiwis who suffer traumatic brain injuries every year, costing ACC \$86 million. While most, like concussion, are classed as mild, it's still the leading cause of long-term

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## Top five causes of non-sport concussion

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
 <b>Fall</b>	5221	5129	5375	5973	6108
<b>Collision/ knocked over by object</b>	1822	2070	1563	1395	1871
 <b>Struck by person or animal</b>	1584	1466	1406	1395	1602
<b>Vehicle accident</b>	350	412	436	480	511
 <b>Other</b>	481	446	471	507	459



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# The hidden toll of concussion

## Non-sport concussion

### FROM C1

disability in children and young people worldwide. While sports concussions hog the headlines, most head-knocks (almost 80 per cent) happen in daily life.

What makes concussion so insidious is its apparently cumulative impact. While a single knock may not cause problems, there's evidence that previous concussions predict longer and poorer recovery.

Langvad-Forster believes the flower pot was her straw that broke the camel's back. She's never been out cold, but she's taken a fair few head-knocks.

She played representative soccer, heading a heavy leather ball. She's whacked her head with hammers like any farm girl. "And who hasn't donked their head on the boot of the car, when you're trying to put your groceries away in the wind.

"Oh, I whack my head all the time' – I hear that often. They don't really understand. And I never did either."

While ACC claims for sports concussion have soared, everyday concussions have remained static, suggesting the increased awareness and diagnosis in sport are not filtering through to other areas.

Based on ACC numbers, falls are the greatest cause of non-sport concussions. Toddlers and young people make up the most claims.

While the numbers are interesting, it was people's stories that motivated Auckland University of Technology associate professor Alice Theadom to research everyday concussions.

She co-authored a *Lancet* study, which looked at a year of traumatic brain injuries in Wai-kato. They've just done a four-year catch-up and the results are striking.

One year on, nearly half those interviewed were still experiencing four or more symptoms, such as fatigue, headaches and difficulty concentrating.

Four years after the injury, 17 per cent had left work or reduced their hours – other than for retirement or study. A further 15.5 per cent made work changes because of the brain injury, such as allowing more time to process information or taking rest breaks.

Those with a history of concussions or brain injuries, or who suffered another head knock within the follow-up period, did worse. As did those who reported taking longer to think and struggling to concentrate a month after their injury.

"Mild" is a misnomer, Theadom says. "It's not mild in terms of the impact."

**B**ack at Hutt Hospital ED, Karen Langvad-Forster and Doug King worry that concussions are going unseen and

untreated, masked by visible injuries. The guy who comes to ED having fallen off a ladder. He hit his head on the side of the house, but it's the wrenched knee he's here for.

Langvad-Forster now tells mums with injured tots to record any head knocks in their Plunket books. King wants to see lessons from sports concussion applied more widely.

"ACC have come up with this policy of what to do for sports

concussion. But a lot of people think 'I've taken the concussion at home so I'm OK'. They see them as different. But a head's a head," King says.

He worries about domestic violence and child abuse victims. He remembers a woman a few years back cowering in a darkened room, after knocking her head against a shelf. Her concussion test scores were "off the planet". She'd never played contact sport, never been concussed. Assault? Ten

years ago, she said. But he never hit me in the head. "It just suddenly dawned on me – holy hell, this is all residual," King says.

A woman gets treated for bruises and injuries, after being slammed against a wall. But where else has that force gone? No-one thinks about the concussion potentially brewing in the background.

"Yes, we've looked after her physically, but we've still done her a big injustice," King says.



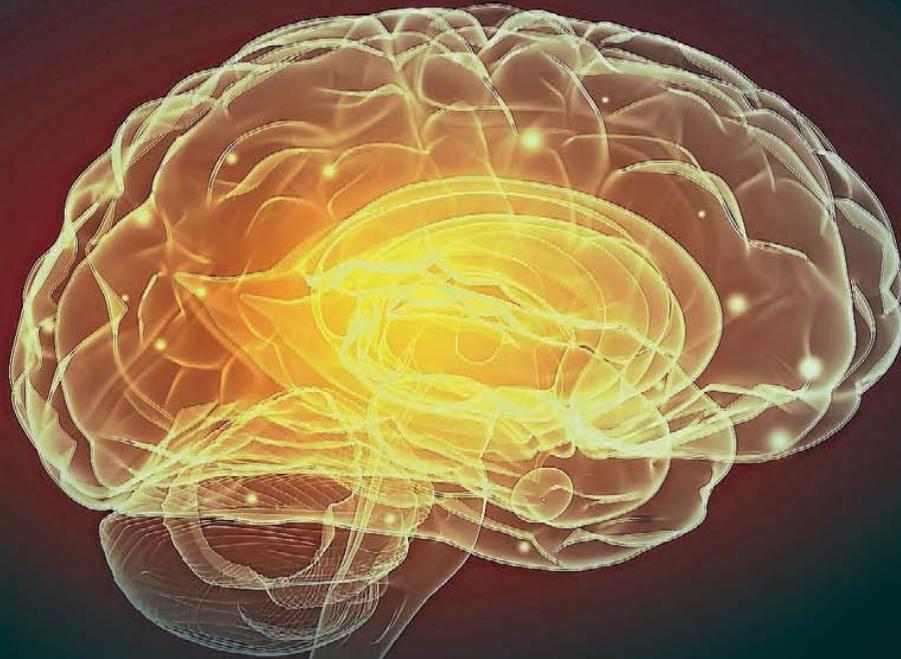
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## What is concussion?

**Concussion is a mild traumatic brain injury, caused by a blow or jolt to the head.**

**The brain floats inside the skull in cerebrospinal fluid, which acts as a shock absorber. Violent acceleration or deceleration of the head can shake the brain against the skull, causing swelling or shearing outer brain tissue and causing immediate disorientation, confusion and memory loss.**

**Only about 10 per cent of concussions result in loss of consciousness.**

**Concussion does not only result from a direct blow to the head. Force rippling through the head from a car accident or being slammed against a wall can have the same effect.**

## Symptoms to look for

**Blurred vision**

**Neck pain**

**Nausea**

**Dizziness**

**Confusion**

**Sensitivity to light &/or noise**

**Anxiety**

**Fatigue**

**Headache/pressure in the head**

**Drowsiness/trouble sleeping**

**Irritability**

**Memory problems**

**Reduced ability to think/  
concentrate**