

BBC Radio 4 programme – Brain Attack

Strokes, the UK's third biggest killer, are high on the NHS agenda, affecting about 150,000 Britons each year. They remain, however, a chilling mystery and one that deserves further exploration. Strokes are commonplace: someone has one every four minutes, yet only those who suffer this cerebral crisis and live to tell the tale can really describe the experience. And no one who has experienced such an earthquake in the brain can ever be fully free of the consequences.

Ever since Robert McCrum suffered a severe stroke in 1995, he has become something of an expert. As he says, "It's one of the remorseless side-effects of the affliction that, if you survive it, you will live with its after-effects and the conundrum about existence it poses, for the rest of your life." At first, Robert grappled with this psychological dimension of his illness by writing an acclaimed memoir, *My Year Off*. But the demands of an ongoing recovery still have to be met. This two part series will be a reflection and continued discovery, twenty years on, of that condition.

Robert says: "Initially, I remember, there was an urgent need to address my physical collapse, a semi-total paralysis. You get offered a lot of advice when you come round after a stroke. Physiotherapy, acupuncture, psychic massage, herbal remedies, psychotherapy, hydrotherapy, electro-neural stimulation: I've tried them all." In the process, Robert has become something of an expert in the alternative treatments available to stroke convalescents, and also highly attuned to the brain's "plasticity"- its capacity to repair itself, to re-wire and to find fresh neural pathways.

Robert's journey starts in Queen's Square, London, one of the world's great centres of neurological inquiry. Art blends with science as the literary man mixes with Britain's top brain surgeons and neurologists at the leading edge of brain research to find out more about strokes. Among the experts he will meet Neil Kitchen who, in addition to his work as a pioneer in cerebral surgery, is also the model for Henry Perowne in Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*. He will also talk to Chelsea and Westminster's Dr. Michael Pelly, leading rehab doctor Richard Greenwood, and the Wellcome unit's neurological guru, Professor Ray Dolan. Robert discovers that despite some extraordinary advances in mapping the electrical activity of the brain, medical science is still struggling to make sense of what these maps mean. He says: "the brain weighs 1.4 kg, less than a bag of flour. You could hold it with ease in the palm of your hand. Yet it's our command post, our HQ, our language, our movement, and our character - in essence, it's our window on the world. The brain is one of the body's miracles - something we take for granted, until we have a cerebral crisis."

Robert explores another equally personal aspect of his journey as a middle-aged stroke victim, which has been the informal counselling and advice he has given to a number of well-known stroke sufferers - from the film actress Maryam d'Abo, and the theatre director Max Stafford-Clark, to the entertainer Chris Tarrant, and of course, Andrew Marr. On top of a steady stream of letters and e-mails from members of the general public, these high-profile patients have become part of Robert's long-term convalescent landscape, an unvarying memento mori as well as a reminder of the range and complexity of stroke recovery.

In the second programme, we follow Robert through an intensive two week long rehabilitation course he has been invited to undertake with a view to rejuvenating his left arm and left leg. This will be conducted by Consultant Neurologist Dr Nick Ward at UCL's Institute of Neurology. Ward is at the cutting edge of neurological research, and he's keen to have Robert as a guinea pig. Robert however is sceptical that his condition can be improved when part of his brain, roughly the size of a lime, is dead and sending no signals to the rest of his body.

20 years on and what can Robert pass on from his visit to the dark side of the cerebral cortex? How close is medical science to finding answers to this age-old affliction? In this moving and informative series, Robert McCrum tells his own story, and in conversation with others in the field, he seeks answers to these questions.