

Facts & Arguments

Stroke survivor: glad to be here

How many ways are there to describe this thing using the letters A, V, and M? Absolutely vile mess. Abnormally vicious mistake. You get the idea.

BY BRENDA MACDONALD

I could call it by its proper medical name — arteriovenous malformation — but that's too much of a mouthful. The acronym, AVM, is much easier to say, but tends to trivialize with its brevity.

I've come up with many names for the anomalous birth defect in my brain.

Some, created while I was lying in one scanner or another, or recuperating from one treatment or another, are the product of a word game I created to combat boredom.

How many ways are there to describe this thing using the letters A, V, and M? Absolutely vile mess. Abnormally vicious mistake. You get the idea.

It's a good way for an aspiring writer to pass time.

Other names, created in moments of frustration and fear as holes were drilled into my skull or radiation was zapped into vital places, will never be and should never be printed on paper.

No matter what I call it, it's a worry. This tangled mass of weak cerebral blood vessels that has leaked many times in the past and could leak in the future. This thing that has given me the honourable title of stroke survivor and that has prompted me to start praying. I pray in the morning to survive the day, and I pray at night to wake up in the morning.

It's an unusual way to live.

Four years ago, I never would have thought I'd be living this way. I certainly never gave mortality a second thought. As a young, healthy, busy mother of two young sons, I simply never had the time.

I also never had reason to think much about it. As a nurse in the Canadian Forces, I had never been seriously ill in my life. I had climbed mountains, and hiked the West Coast Trail. I was a certified scuba diver, had jumped from a helicopter onto a glacier, and had delivered both of my healthy sons naturally.

Then one day, while I was washing dishes in my kitchen sink, I suddenly saw

three of everything out of my left eye... I seriously didn't know where my left leg had gone to... and a volcano of pain erupted within my skull.

It's been four years since that moment.

I've found my leg and it now works as it should, most of the time. I generally now see only one of everything. I'm a little more forgetful, a little dizzier, and often a little grumpier than I was four years ago but, like all people, I have bad days and good days. On the bad days, I feel sorry for myself. On the good days, I wouldn't choose to change a thing because I appreciate the lessons I've learned on this journey.

I've learned that two little boys are the world's best physiotherapy.

I've learned that I'll never stop needing my Mom.

I've learned that, now that I've been a patient, I want to be a better nurse.

I've learned that, medically speaking, you should always get a second opinion.

I've realized that, while I cursed them in the beginning, doctors saved my life in the end.

I've learned that children should be taught how to dial 911 as soon as they know how to count to 10.

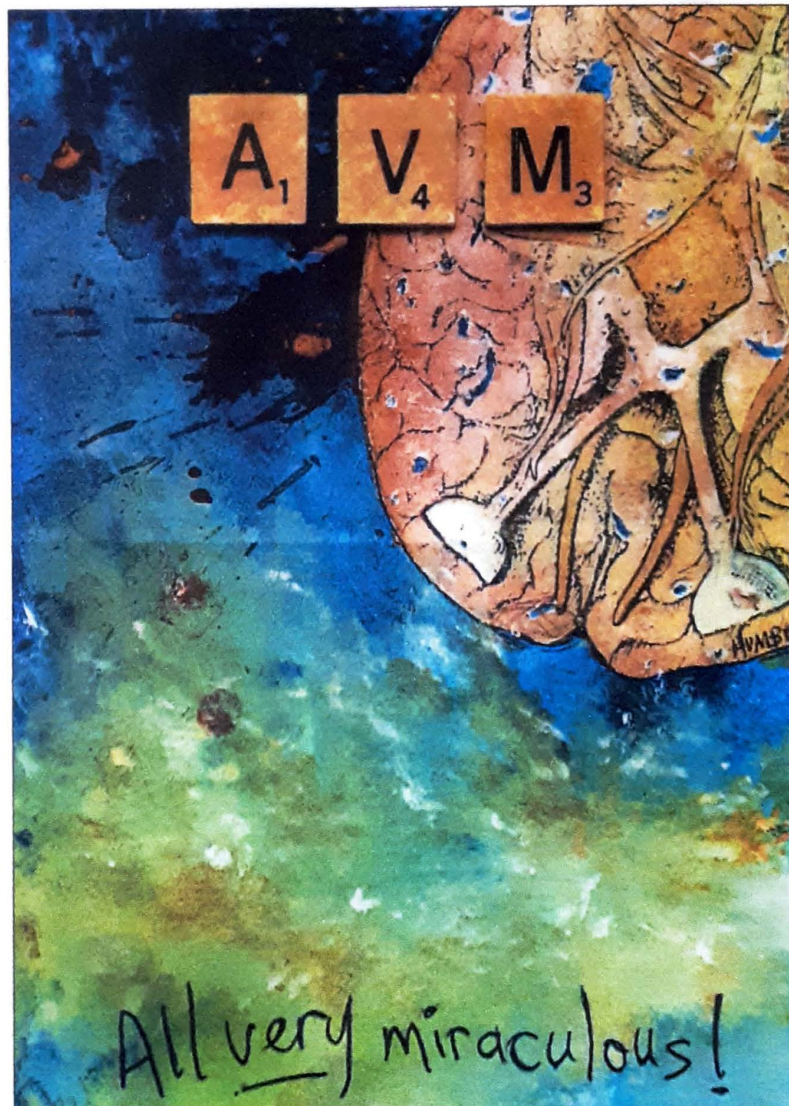
I've learned that having a husband who can make you laugh, even when your hair is falling out, is a true blessing.

I've learned that life is one big unpredictable trip.

I've learned that money actually can't buy happiness, there actually is no place like home, and that hope actually does spring eternal.

I've become a cliché... and I'm surprisingly happy in my newfound mediocrity.

Soon after I got sick, I went through a phase in which I thought the brain damage I had sustained had given me psychic abilities. I knew what my children were thinking, I knew what was going to happen next. I finished my husband's sentences, and often understood things with



LARRY HUMBER

such clarity that I got goose bumps.

I soon realized, however, that there was nothing supernatural about what I was experiencing. My illness had simply given me the benefit of time and I was, for maybe the first time since my childhood, able to focus wholeheartedly on the fascinating world around me.

Until I got sick, I had been consumed by trying to be the perfect wife, the perfect mother, and the perfect career woman. I'd still be trying to be those things, and I'd still be failing miserably to do so, if my brain had behaved.

Obviously, however, it didn't. So, I've adapted to my new circumstances. I've given up on aiming for perfection because

one other thing I've learned is that perfection can never truly be achieved. The trick in life is to be happy and content with the imperfection of what you have and are.

Life is truly AVM — all very miraculous.

And one more thing: I am astronomically lucky. I never paid any attention to all the hype and concern about heart disease and stroke. Then I actually had a stroke and wished I had listened. I was 34 years old and in perfect health when it happened to me. It can happen to anyone... so please pay attention this month: June is Stroke Awareness Month.

Brenda MacDonald lives in Kingston, Ont.