

Life has changed for Rory MacLeod

LAGGAN – Things are looking up for 23-year-old Rory MacLeod.

Since first telling his story to The Review in April, MacLeod, who suffers from multiple sclerosis, is back on his feet – this time without the use of a cane – and is looking forward to being a father as early as next month.

It's a stark contrast from his condition last October, when he was confined full-time to a wheelchair and was quickly losing his eyesight.

"I'm doing much better," MacLeod said, sitting down to an interview alongside his girlfriend, Kierstian Chambers, at their home in Laggan. "My balance has improved – it's not perfect yet – and my muscles are doing well. I have good resistance and I'm getting back to being at par with everyone else."

At par means his eyesight is now 20/30 in both eyes, according to his most recent eye exam. His peripheral vision is back and he hopes to have his driver's licence renewed; compare that to last year, when he suffered from blurred, tunnel-like vision.

Sensation has returned to his fingers, his feet, his reflexes and his joints. His motor skills have improved, though his neurologist is still a little concerned about his leg control.

MacLeod says he assumes his neurologist, based at a multiple sclerosis clinic in Ottawa, is sticking with the diagnosis he was given in 2009: "progressive remitting," one held by only 0.2 per cent of multiple sclerosis patients.

He firmly believes the improvement in his condition is due to the "liberation" procedure he received in Mexico last October. It has yet to receive approval from Health Canada, making it somewhat controversial, and leaving Canadians like MacLeod to travel to abroad – as far as India or Costa Rica – and pay large sums for the procedure.

While some patients have suffered dangerous blood clots after receiving the procedure, MacLeod reiterates the treatment has been nothing but positive. In fact, he began feeling the effects of the treatment as early as the next morning.

Now, he added, his doctor in Ottawa can no longer offer a prognosis on his future: "They really have no answers for me, but they really haven't had any since day one. They say, 'If you're doing well, then we'll just keep doing what you're doing.'"

MacLeod still experiences some stiffness in his legs, but other than that, there are no plans to visit the doctor any time soon. "That's the basis for all MS patients. Once [the doctors] have established your diagnosis, and where you're at, you go back for an MRI every year."



Kierstian Chambers and Rory MacLeod at their new home in Laggan last month. The couple is expecting their first child in mid-December. PHOTO JUSTIN BROMBERG

Vibroacoustic harp therapy

There's one other twist to the story, found in Vankleek Hill resident Ian Hepburn, who set out to contact MacLeod after reading his story in The Review last April.

As a musician and a certified vibroacoustic harp therapy practitioner, Hepburn uses a full-size pedal harp and a custom-made hydroacoustic sound table to provide therapy sessions to palliative care patients and those suffering from chronic pain.

Since 2007, Hepburn has used the therapy to help people with headaches, insomnia, anxiety, chronic pain, and fibromyalgia. Before meeting MacLeod, however, he had never worked with an MS patient.

"I didn't know where it was going," Hepburn admitted. "But the one thing I asked was, 'If there was one thing to address, what would it be?' And Rory told me it was walking."

Hepburn recalls MacLeod telling him "the messages weren't getting from the brain to the muscles quickly or properly, and that there was a 'jerk.'"

"I was hoping to restore the balance and the flow of energy from the nerves to the muscles, and establish or restore the flow or energy in the body," he continued.

MacLeod agreed on one session at Hepburn's clinic in Vankleek Hill. The next day, he called Hepburn to report he had slept without waking up for the first time in two years.

"I started sleeping better, I felt more relaxed, at ease," MacLeod explained. "The stiffness in my legs was going away and my motor control came back. I just felt better, that's all I can say about it."

For her part, his girlfriend noticed a significant change in his demeanour.

MS sufferer helped by local harp therapy, now looks forward to being Dad

“He was more calm,” said Chambers. “He was just getting one treatment, and this helped; his walking got better, his dexterity came back, and his mood was better.”

Hepburn, who asks patients to rate their pain levels before each session, remembers MacLeod initially rating his pain at “five” and “six.” By the time the pair had finished working together – nine sessions later – MacLeod said that pain was down to “one.”

“Originally, it was like a wire was shorting out in my body,” recalled MacLeod. “But the signal was strong, and the harp therapy seemed to correct that.”

Adds Hepburn: “Those pain levels, we saw them falling week by week. But, I wondered, would it stay that way?”

Chambers said it seemed to depend on what MacLeod was doing, day to day. Still, even attending the Highland Games in Maxville this summer – something he was never able to do before – MacLeod’s pain seemed to peak at “two” or “three,” and then returned to normal.

“I had no expectations,” Hepburn reiterated. “The only thing I could base my experience on was a patient with fibromyalgia. And I wouldn’t say Rory’s reaction was dramatically better, because he’s a lot younger than most people I would see with fibromyalgia, and so I’d seen this happen before. But it was quite dramatic with Rory.”

He continues, looking at MacLeod: “It was the next day that you called me to tell me you slept the entire night. It was really a dramatic improvement.”

Hepburn said he hopes to continue using his experience with MacLeod, as well as other fibromyalgia patients, in his practice. For now, he still has many questions. Would the frequency of the sessions – more than once a week, for example – be a factor? Or if the pain is minimized after a couple of days but then comes back, would more frequent sessions allow the therapy to hold more quickly and more long-term?

In MacLeod’s experience, the answer is yes. The first session gave him relief for one or two days; in the third week,

it brought him halfway to the next session; and by the eighth and final session, “it felt good all week, and seemed to carry itself through.”

In Hepburn’s eyes, the experience opened a new chapter in vibroacoustic harp therapy. Earlier this month at the Hawkesbury General Hospital, he gave a session to a young woman suffering from multiple sclerosis and hopes she will pursue the therapy – both for her health and so he can further the data on his work.

“I really hope we’ll get to the point where we could have scientific verification to explain how this works,” he added.

In October, Hepburn was invited to Wilfrid Laurier University to present a workshop on vibroacoustic harp therapy, as one of nine speakers addressing topics like music therapy and autism, music and neurological research with children, music and preserving self in Alzheimer dementia care, and so forth.

“Wilfrid Laurier has a well-regarded department of music therapy, one of the few in Canada,” he said. “The conference was a great success and worth the trauma of hauling a harp and massage table on VIA Rail.”

As for MacLeod, the young man continues to make leaps and bounds. At last contact, he was still optimistic about getting his driver’s licence renewed; in the meantime, he’s been spending more time outdoors, piling wood and helping his father feed the calves, and preparing to be a father as early as next month. The baby is due in December.

“The liberation treatment got the big chunk, and the harp therapy tweaked it,” he said. “I’ll just keep going as I’m going. If it keeps improving, it just keeps improving.”

For more information on vibroacoustic harp therapy, visit vibroacousticharp-therapy.ca.