

Australian stroke victim walks again - with help of botox

June 20 2009, by Neil Sands

An Australian stroke victim paralysed for more than 20 years has walked again thanks to anti-wrinkle drug botox, in a case hailed as extraordinary by his medical team.

Russell McPhee, 49, was confined to a wheelchair after suffering a severe [stroke](#) 23 years ago that left him so disabled that doctors initially told him he would never leave hospital.

But after being injected with [botox](#), the anti-ageing treatment popular among Hollywood celebrities, McPhee can walk around his home unaided and travel up to 100 metres (330 feet) using a walking stick.

"I thought I was going to die in a wheelchair," McPhee told AFP.

The former meatworker admitted he and girlfriend Kerry Crossley were initially sceptical when told about the treatment.

"(Kerry) chipped in and said 'what, don't you think he's pretty enough?'" McPhee said.

Botox, or [botulinum toxin](#), blocks the [nerve signals](#) which tell muscles to contract, flattening wrinkles when used on the face. But it can also help patients left immobile by brain injuries, multiple sclerosis, spinal problems or strokes.

Valentina Maric, physiotherapist at the St. John of God Hospital in

Victoria state, explained that McPhee was unable to walk because the stroke had left his muscles in permanent spasm.

"The muscles were turned on all the time because of the messages coming from his brain," she said.

The botox stopped the spasms, Maric said, allowing the McPhee to stretch out the affected leg muscles for the first time in decades and strengthen other muscles needed for walking.

She said muscles that had not been used for so long would normally have withered away, but McPhee's were remarkably intact, leading to rapid progress after he started the treatment 18 months ago.

"You usually see results in someone who has recently had a stroke but we've never has such a good response from someone so far down the track (decades after a stroke)," Maric said.

"The botox provided the kickstart needed to start the treatment."

However, doctor Nathan Johns stressed that McPhee's muscle strength and determination were a key element in his remarkable progress.

"Not every case is so successful," he said. "Mr McPhee had unusually good [muscle](#) power and great determination, despite the fact that he had been confined to a wheelchair for so long."

McPhee said he had been forced to push through the pain barrier to become mobile again.

"It's not just a matter of getting your botox injection then going to bed and being able to walk in the morning, it takes a lot of hard work," he said.

He says inspiration came from girlfriend Kerry, a childhood sweetheart who rescued him from a spiral of depression and talked him into rehabilitation when they were reunited two-and-a-half years ago.

"I was in a pretty bad way with depression," said McPhee, who played football, cricket, basketball and tennis -- "any sport you like" -- before his stroke.

"I felt like my life was over."

With the help of Kerry and the team from St. John of God, McPhee hopes that one day he will no longer need the three-monthly botox shots in his legs and arm.

McPhee said he was working on making his non-spastic muscles strong enough to compensate for the ones that contract, creating a long-term solution to his condition.

"That's the aim," said McPhee, adding that he also plans to marry Kerry.

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