

HURT LOCKER Groundbreaking device relieving chronic pain left after parachuting accident

The man who fell to Earth and lived

Damon Cronshaw

WHEN Grant Archard's parachute became tangled in an Australian Army exercise, he plummeted 300 metres and landed flat on his back.

The jump should have been a 50-second descent, but he hit the ground at high speed after only 12 seconds in the air. Mr Archard, of Medowie, fractured three vertebrae in the accident, which happened at Singleton in a "static-line parachute exercise".

"You jump out the door and the parachute gets deployed. The person behind me got tangled in my main parachute. Then we descended under his reserve parachute," Mr Archard, now 42, said.

"I remember hitting the ground and thinking I was going to die. I was winded, but at that point I wasn't in any pain because of the adrenaline."

Half an hour later in an army ambulance, the adrenaline wore off. While being treated in an army hospital, he said "the pain was horrible".

In the years since, Mr Archard struggled with debilitating chronic back pain, bulging discs in his lower back, PTSD and severe mental health issues linked to the pain. To treat the pain, he wore a back brace, saw dozens of specialists, took pain management courses and had spinal injections.

He became dependent on pain medication to function, before realising the drugs weren't the answer.

"It becomes a vicious cycle," he said.

He turned to a restorative neurostimulation device, which research has shown can improve the lives of people like Mr Archard. Dr Marc



Grant Archard had a parachuting accident in the army in 2005. Picture by Peter Lorimer

Russo, director of Hunter Pain Specialists, implanted the device in Mr Archard at Newcastle Private Hospital in August last year.

Dr Russo said the treatment aimed to "not simply block pain, but restore function".

"It brings back online muscles that are not contracting the way they should be," Dr Russo said.

"We put a tiny electrode over the nerve to the muscle and connect that to a tiny battery, all of which goes underneath the skin as an implant."

The patient has a remote control to switch on the device twice a day, which contracts the muscle for 30 minutes each time.

"If we can get the muscle carrying some of the weight of the spine, as it's designed to do, then three out of four people get improved pain

and functional capacity," Dr Russo said.

"For one out of four it doesn't make a major difference, only a minor difference."

Mr Archard said he started to notice a reduction in pain after four to six months.

"Between six and 12 months, I noticed more pain reduction. My pain has reduced by about 20 per cent, but my functional capacity has improved 100 per cent."

In May, he finished his first Ironman triathlon.

"The biggest thing is the everyday stuff. I'm able to drive my kids to school, mow the lawn and do stuff around the house," he said.

Dr Russo, who has implanted many patients with the device, said "when Grant first walked through my door, he couldn't walk far".

"Before the implant, he



Grant Archard tangled in a colleague's reserve parachute in an army exercise.

said if this works I'll run a triathlon. I didn't believe him, but he did.

"It's testimony that the human body can recover even from the most serious of injuries. Sometimes it needs a helping hand to get the system back on track."

University of Newcastle Professor Brett Graham, a pain researcher, said

restorative neurostimulation was "certainly a valid intervention".

"It's an intervention of last resort. For a patient to be eligible for this type of therapy, they need to have gone through all the drug and psychological options to try to reduce the level of pain they're experiencing," Professor Graham said.

Paramedics win 'salary justice' in historic deal

Maeve Bannister

PARAMEDICS in NSW will get a significant pay boost after months of negotiations finally led to a deal between a major union and the state government.

The bitter dispute has plagued the Minns government for more than eight months as paramedics pointed to higher salaries offered to their colleagues in the ACT, Queensland and Victoria.

Following a series of late-night talks, the government and Health Services Union announced on Wednesday they had struck a deal for an average pay rise of 25 per cent over five years.

Increases will range from 11 to 29 per cent, depending on paramedics' level of experience. The rises will include a boost to the base salary for year-six paramedics from \$79,737 to \$88,082 from the start of next year, an up-front increase of more than 10 per cent.

The agreement will cost around \$500 million, part of which is to be funded through savings from within the health portfolio, the government said.

HSU NSW secretary Gerard Hayes said paramedics had fought for proper professional recognition and "salary justice".

"Our paramedics are highly skilled professionals who exercise fine clinical judgement under incredible stress," he said.

"Their work saves lives. Finally they will be paid for it."

The deal needs to be confirmed by the Industrial Relations Commission, where the parties entered mediation on Monday.

Secrets Of Midwives author to headline writers festival

Josh Leeson

NEW YORK Times best-selling Melbourne author Sally Hepworth will make her maiden appearance at the Newcastle Writers Festival in April as part of a star-studded line-up.

The 11th Newcastle Writers Festival will feature a program of 125 writers from April 5 to 7.

Hepworth, best known for her novels *The Secrets Of Midwives* (2015) and Davitt Award-winner *The Good Sister* (2020), is celebrating the

recent release of her ninth book *The Soulmate*.

Miles Franklin Award-winner and Indigenous author, Melissa Lucashenko, will discuss her most recent work *Edenglassie*, a historical novel.

Celebrated journalist David Marr will also return to discuss *Killing for Country: A Family Story*, a sobering account of his forebears' involvement with the brutal Native Police in the bloodiest years of the frontier wars. Other notable guests for the Newcastle Writers Festival

include *Stone Yard Devotional* author Charlotte Wood, Dylan Thomas Prize-winner Nam Le and Christos Tsiolkas, best known for his modern classic *The Slap*.

Festival director Rosemarie Milsom has for the first time in a decade delegated most of the program preparation to a new team member, writer and Secret Book Stuff co-founder Amy Lovat.

"It's become more difficult to manage the festival - the fundraising, logistics, and other programs we run - as well as the artistic program-

ing," said Milsom.

"Amy is passionate about Australian books and has imbued the program with a deep knowledge and enthusiasm."

Lovat began her involvement with the festival a decade ago as a volunteer and later became program manager. "The 2024 festival program is rich with ideas and inspiration," Lovat said.

"We're thrilled to be welcoming some favourites back, as well as introducing a strong contingent of debut authors."



Sally Hepworth will make her first appearance at the Newcastle Writers Festival in April. Picture supplied