

# Lessons in grace, care and resilience

His father's devastating injury on the hockey field led Dr Jason D'Silva to undertake award-winning spinal research



Dr Jason D'Silva with his dad, Joslyn, at his UWA graduation.

**D**r Jason D'Silva was gearing up for his second bid to study medicine at the University of Western Australia (UWA) in 2019 when his father, a state-level hockey player, suffered a life-changing spinal cord injury on the field.

"Honestly, it's crazy what happened," Jason recalls.

"My mum and I were there at the hockey game, a semi-final or something, and all of a sudden there was a commotion on the pitch. Everyone was screaming for help, and a player was lying on the ground.

"I was far away from the action and everything happened so quickly. I then realised I couldn't see Dad standing around, because he was the person getting CPR."

Joslyn D'Silva had suffered a severe cervical spinal cord injury, but no one suspected that at the time.

"Spinal cord injuries like this are very, very rare overall, especially to Dad's extent," Jason says.

"So, everyone thought the most likely cause of someone at 60 falling down on the field and being unresponsive was a heart attack or some sort of cardiac arrest. It took a few days

to be picked up that he had a spinal cord injury. The diagnosis just came out of left field, honestly."

His fellow hockey players say Joslyn was reaching out for the ball with his stick when he probably slipped.

"My dad can't remember anything from the incident," Jason says.

"This sort of spinal cord injury commonly occurs with a hyperextension of the neck. The most common mechanism for patients to get a cervical spinal cord injury like this one, which is very high up in the neck, is when they dive into a shallow pool. I doubt anyone in the history of hockey has had an injury like Dad's."

With the discovery of the cervical spinal cord injury, Joslyn was transferred to Royal Perth Hospital (RPH) where he spent three months in ICU before being transferred to Fiona Stanley Hospital for about nine months of rehabilitation.

The year before his dad's accident, Jason had completed a biomedical science degree at UWA, majoring in Pharmacology, but his application to do medicine had been unsuccessful. At this time, he opted to pursue an honours research project in Respiratory Pharmacology before reapplying in 2019.

"I was in the process of applying for medicine again while doing my year of research," he recalls.

"Then my dad had his injury in July, so I ended up not completing that honours year because of everything that was going on. But I did apply for Medicine again that year and attended the interview while my dad was in ICU. When he was in rehab, I found out I'd finally got in."

For Jason, getting into medicine in the same year as experiencing the impact of his dad's intensive medical treatment was "very weird".

"Honestly, I've been very fortunate that no one else in my family had been unwell prior to this. As my dad was in ICU for so long, we were visiting every day, and it had kind of

became a new normal for us. You just get used to that kind of environment.

"Looking back, I don't think I had a good appreciation of what it meant to be a doctor or to really care for people before Dad's accident. That experience gave me a much greater understanding of the realities of medicine."

Jason, an AMA (WA) member, graduated from UWA at the end of 2023 and started his internship at RPH in 2024. In his first year, he did a term in the Spinal Unit, working with Orthopaedic Spinal Surgeon Mr Farhaan Altaf, the specialist who had looked after his father in hospital.

"Since getting into medicine, I'd always wanted to do a spinal term just to see more spinal cord injuries and the treatment of them. Not to face my fears or relive my experience with Dad – but just to experience it again and see what it was like from the other side," he says.

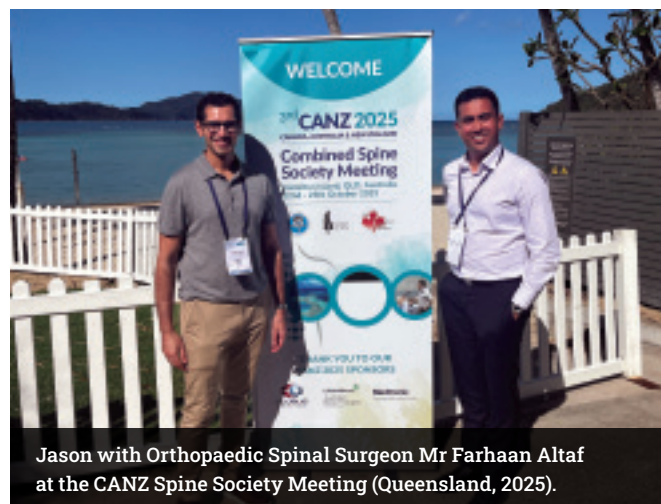
It was Mr Altaf who suggested Jason undertake a research project looking at the spinal management and outcomes of patients with central cord syndrome. Mr Altaf supervised the research.

"There's a bit of controversy about how central cord syndrome should be managed," Jason says.

"What's really promising about this type of injury is that there's usually some recovery, or more recovery compared to other types of spinal cord injuries. This type of injury usually presents differently as well. Patients generally have greater upper limb weakness compared to their lower limbs. Most spinal cord injuries are the opposite."

Jason's five-year retrospective cohort study at RPH won the Rob Johnston Award for the best paper presented by a surgical trainee at the Spine Society of Australia's annual scientific meeting in Perth last year. As the winner, Jason was then invited to present his paper again at the third CANZ (Canada, Australia, New Zealand) Combined Spinal Society meeting in Queensland last October.

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Jason with Orthopaedic Spinal Surgeon Mr Farhaan Altaf at the CANZ Spine Society Meeting (Queensland, 2025).

"Usually, this award is for doctors more experienced than I was, so being able to win it was a nice surprise," Jason says.

Now in his third year as a junior doctor at RPH, Jason is still undecided about his future career path, except that he knows it will definitely be in a hospital.

"I always had an interest in spinal surgery after Dad's injury," he says.

"But I also have an interest in intensive care, because the team at RPH did such an amazing job with Dad as well.

"Part of me really enjoys spinal surgery and Orthopaedics, but I've always also enjoyed critical care in the ICU, and that's more related to my undergrad degree. I'm still trying to figure it out, to be honest."

Joslyn D'Silva has now been back home for six years. He is a quadriplegic and permanently on a ventilator, with 24-hour care provided under the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Despite not being able to move his arms or legs, Joslyn has experienced significant improvement in his quality of life over the years. He has gone from not being able to speak, eat or drink, to now being able to go out for dinner with family and friends, play sudoku, and watch the West Coast Eagles at the stadium with his sons.

"The one thing that amazes me about my dad is that he's never really complained about anything," Jason says.

"Even before the accident, he was a very content and humble person... he's always been patient with others, and he's grateful every day for life at home with his family." ■