

Talking point



RAISING AWARENESS: Deborah Byrne of the Brain Injury Association of Tasmania, right, with University of Tasmania lecturer Dr Lisa Foa, says: 'Brain injury is 10 times more common than spinal injury and results, on average, in three times the level of disability.'



Greg Barns

EARLIER this year, a British survey found that 68 per cent of people who suffer from brain injury suffer some form of discrimination. And 64 per cent of those people are unemployed — a figure that is staggeringly and alarmingly high.

People who have suffered brain injury are chronically misunderstood in our society. The British survey, commissioned by support group Headway, tells a story of two sufferers that neatly and tragically illustrates the sort of discrimination that occurs in everyday life.

One sufferer, Kirsty, "regularly faces prejudice such as being humiliated on a packed bus by a driver who refused to accept her disabled pass and being denied entry to pubs due to her lack of balance leading to people assuming she's drunk".

Another individual, Lisa-Marie, has found that her speech "can sometimes be a little slow and she often needs people to speak slowly to her to allow her to take in information. This leads to people calling her stupid and treating her as if she's inferior."

The difficulty with acquired brain injury — that is, injury received as a result of a blow to the head from an assault, a car accident or some other type of physical mishap — is that it is often undiagnosed and even when it is diagnosed it is difficult to treat.

About one Australian in 45 has an acquired brain injury, and someone somewhere in the world is sustaining a brain injury every 15

Trauma focus required

seconds. Two-thirds of those people sustain the injury before they are 25. And as Deborah Byrne, who runs the Brain Injury Association of Tasmania, observed last week: "Brain injury is 10 times more common than spinal injury and results, on average, in three times the level of disability. The brain is

Glenn McGrath, who died of breast cancer earlier this year, hit the news it elevates awareness of that particular illness. It does not appear to be the case with acquired brain injury, no doubt partly because it is harder to recognise and sometimes takes some years to manifest itself.

Of course, understanding and

ethical grounds if to do so is to slow the rate of progress for acquired brain injury sufferers.

Given its impact on people's behaviour, it is not surprising that acquired brain injury and the commission of crime can go hand in hand. Fortunately, the legal system is recognising — if slowly — that a person with an acquired brain injury will often have diminished responsibility for the crime they commit. The Victorian Supreme Court, the most progressive and socially aware court in Australia, has recently dealt with such a case.

Peter Rattya, 42, appealed against a 21-year sentence he received for murdering his victim with a bow and arrow. The Victorian Court of Appeal reduced the sentence to 18 years on the basis Rattya had suffered an acquired brain injury and had chronic mental illness problems, and this should have been given more weight by the judge who first sentenced him.

Acquired brain injury is a sleeper of an issue for our community, but when we recognise the potency of its effect we will better understand why people behave in seemingly odd or destructive ways, and we will have greater compassion and understanding for them. Ensuring that funds are available for treatment and research of acquired brain injury is a wise investment for the future of our society.

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immensely fragile; injuring it is unlike injuring any other part of the body.”

As a society we need to elevate this issue in the same way that we have high-profile diseases like breast cancer, prostate cancer and eating disorders. Many of us know a good deal about those illnesses and what can cause them and how we can prevent them, but unless we know someone who is an acquired brain injury sufferer, it is not a cause of illness that is front and centre for the community.

When high-profile figures like the late Jane McGrath, wife of cricketer

better treating acquired brain injury will be enhanced by use of stem cell research. As one leading US medical research group put it, acquired brain injury patients "are prime candidates for stem cell therapy due to the characteristics of neurological tissue and its innate potential for regeneration after trauma".

While it is early days in research efforts on stem cells being utilised to alleviate the damage and trauma caused by acquired brain injury, it is obviously vital that legislators do not place roadblocks on stem cell research on dubious religious or