



Fatigue: the hidden factor

Nearly 15 years ago **ROBYN SCOTT'S** husband almost died in a coal mine. Investigators struggled to find a cause other than 'Act of God' but suggested long working shifts might have been a factor.

Early one Saturday morning I was woken by my partner who was getting ready for his shift at work. It was Sam. He was on the sixth day of a six days on, one day off roster. The hours of work were ten per day with an additional hour each way for travel, so essentially it was a 12 hour day.

He was a coal miner and had been since leaving school at 16. At the age of 42 he had a lot of experience and had been called upon to become part of a small team to redevelop a mine. This was the type of mining he loved. Shot-Fire-Shovel. Real man's work.

During the early stages of reopening this mine there were just two miners working underground and one safety person 'up top'. Les had a real passion for mining. It was pretty much all he had ever done. He had at one stage decided to try his hand at forestry work, but if you asked him what his occupation was at the time he would still have said coal miner, and was proud of it.

Les felt that safety in a coal mine was something you couldn't be taught

in a classroom. It was something you developed over time. You came to sense a change in the air or atmosphere, a movement in the roof or the floor, or a sound or creak which was out of the ordinary. You had to have your wits about you. It worried him that young people came through a mining school and entered the mine thinking they knew it all.

Having moved to his new role he was particularly pleased to be working alongside another miner who he had grown up with, and who, like him, had been a miner for all his working life.

Les was safety conscious. I wasn't in a safety role at the time but he once brought home a video of roof bolting to show me how reinforcing is secured to a roof and how the drilling, roof bolting and hardening compound work. To him a mine could be as safe as houses, and he felt totally at home in his workplace surroundings.

TIRED BEFORE WORK

On this particular Saturday morning Les woke me up to tell me he was tired and didn't feel up to going to work. It was Sam

on a Saturday morning. I wasn't exactly receptive to having a dirt chat – and there was no accompanying cup of tea!

We both knew that he couldn't simply stay home. There were only the three guys working and if he didn't go then the shift couldn't be worked.

And at 5am on a Saturday morning it would be a bit hard to ring around and find a replacement.

To make him (probably more myself) feel better I said I would move the lawns that day so he didn't have to do them on his only day off (Sunday). But in all honesty I just wanted him to bugger off so I could go back to sleep.

So off to work he went. Some hours later I was visiting my parents who had just returned home from hospital – Dad after a heart attack and Mum a stroke. They were refusing home help so my sister and I were doing up some meals for them for the week. There was

much conversation, laughter and banter going on when the phone rang. The caller was my niece who said the police had been looking for me and I had to get to the hospital immediately. All I remember is looking at Mum and Dad and thinking if it's not them then it's one of the kids. But it wasn't – it was Les.

THE INJURY
On arrival at the hospital I was told that a slab of rock from the roof had hit him on the back of the head and forced him forward into a large drilling machine which was on the ground. He had suffered a major head injury and appeared to have lost an eye. All they could do at the Grey Base Hospital was apply some sutures to stem the bleeding and monitor him. If and it was a five percent if he survived the night they would transfer him to Christchurch Hospital.

And survive he did. He underwent a 23-hour operation in Christchurch where they reconstructed his skull. They also found his eye in his cheek cavity and constructed a new eye socket to position it on.

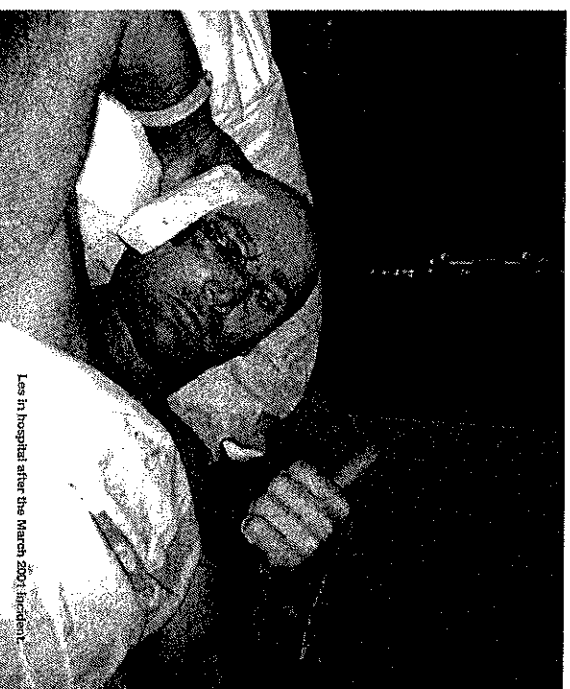
They could see that the optical nerves were intact. Unfortunately the muscles to move the eye were not so the eye and eyelid remain unusable.

WHAT WENT WRONG?
Les and his work mate had set off a blast, had cleaned the coal and had bolted reinforcing to the roof. They then decided it was crib time. His workmate walked back to the area where their lunchboxes were kept but when he returned he found Les injured.

A section of rock, later found to be 140kg, had fallen as a slab from the roof. One of the roof bolts had failed (sheared off at the bolt end) and the rock was able to slide along the reinforcing and to the ground, taking out Les on the way. Regulatory investigators found the pattern of roof reinforcing and bolt placement was spot on, and went well beyond the minimum requirement.

They found the failed bolt, on its own,

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Les in hospital after the March 2007 incident.

was of no significance as the slab came down at the reinforcing join and took out other bolts as well.

The investigation outcome was that the event was 'an Act of God'.

The only item identified as a contributing factor was fatigue. The work was labour intensive.

The men were working 10 hours a day 'on the tools' and had an hour's travel each way to and from work.

The investigators found that if Les and his workmate hadn't been so tired, they might have sensed something.

The company acted immediately to reduce the work day to eight hours and the consecutive shifts to five days in a row. Later, as the mine grew, they also provided a nominated van driver.

THE FATIGUE FACTOR

Les would tell you to this day that his accident happened because he was tired. He didn't sense, hear or see anything was going to happen.

He has not been able to work since the accident. Fatigue is now his daily companion.

The effects of his head injury mean that he needs his 'nana naps' and is prone to epilepsy (although this is currently well controlled with medication).

Having previously been a triathlete, keen runner and cyclist, this change of lifestyle was hard for him to adapt to.

His workmate also suffered injury on the day of Les's incident, by putting his back out carrying Les over a kilometre uphill out of the mine.

He recovered and continued his mining career. There is no doubt that his response and actions on that day saved Les's life.

Fatigue should never be underestimated. When someone gets to the point that they are mentioning how tired or drained they are, we need to listen rather than adopt our ingrained Kiwi attitude of just getting the job done.

In today's competitive environment we are working harder and longer hours, particularly when daylight saving kicks in, or a holiday period is looming.

Please do not put the fatigue factor to one side. Be mindful of how it can affect how our senses perform, or how much thought will go into our decision making.

LES WOULD TELL YOU TO THIS DAY THAT HIS ACCIDENT HAPPENED BECAUSE HE WAS TIRED.

POSTSCRIPT

Eight years after Les was injured his friend was running a gang of eight in the same mine, which had since grown. He sensed a movement in the roof.

He called to the men working behind him and managed to get them all safely out of the danger zone before the roof collapsed. Sadly as he shepherded others out he was himself caught in the rockfall.

Our hero lost his life that day but his alert actions saved others. One of those who escaped injury was his own son.

Robyn Scott is health and safety coordinator and executive assistant with ElectroNet Services in Greymouth.

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