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‘CAREER SHAPED BY AGONY ON THE RUGBY FIELD’

By Dina Medland

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Stephen Duckworth was at the end of his third year of studying medicine at the University of London. Aged 21, he recalls “living the life of someone born with a silver spoon in my mouth”.

A keen rugby player, he was happy to train. But at a training session for a Guy’s Hospital team, two bodies landed on him on hard ground. It broke his neck.

“I knew exactly what had happened,” he says. “I didn’t lose consciousness, but I had a searing pain in my neck, and otherwise I could feel nothing.” He suddenly became “the first disabled person I had ever met”.

After a few days, his professor Ian McColl, now Lord McColl, visited him in hospital and said simply: “Don’t worry – you’ll qualify as a doctor one day.” Mr Duckworth recalls: “It was those words of encouragement that kept me going.”

After spending almost three years in and out of hospital battling infection, undergoing more than 17 operations and, at one stage, being told to “go home and die”, he did qualify as a doctor in 1985, although it became obvious that his disability would make it too difficult to practice. But becoming a doctor, he says, is “almost a genetic condition” in his family.

As a boy he worked hard enough to finish school a year early and made sure he had experience of working in what was then a mental institution in the UK and at the Mayo Clinic in the US. He was also constantly undertaking research projects. “It was only when I went to university that I took my foot off the pedal and became a social animal, enjoying sailing, rugby and other activities,” he says.

Since his accident, Mr Duckworth has shaped his career around his disability – he is completely paralysed apart from some movement in his right arm. Last year he joined Capita, the FTSE 100 support services company, seizing an opportunity “to transform historic approaches to undertaking disability assessments for the government”.

He is leading the Personal Independence Payment assessment process, which Capita is carrying out in half of the UK – Atos Healthcare is covering the other half – on behalf of the Department of Work and Pensions. PIP replaces the Disability Living Allowance from April 8 and Capita's role will be to assess claimants.

Mr Duckworth is determined “to instil professionalism with empathy for disabled people and make it the heart of everything we do”.

This extends to Capita's own business: the company has set “an expectation that we should employ disabled people as 40 per cent of the business division – which, at maximum running will amount to 600 people”, Mr Duckworth says.

Senior jobs are already being filled by professional disabled people, and the intention is “to create entry-level jobs as well, in contact centres”.

“We are trying to set up a whole culture within the organisation,” he says.

Before being headhunted to join Capita just before the London 2012 Olympics began, Mr Duckworth had spent almost four years with rival outsourcing company, Serco, taking on several roles and winning frequent promotions. He ended up as “strategic development director – cabinet office”, responsible for the company's relationship with the heart of government.

Before that, he ran Disability Matters, his own successful consultancy, for 20 years, after first obtaining a PhD exploring the rights and responsibilities of disabled people. At 34, he was awarded an OBE for services to disabled people.

He has also held non-executive positions in bodies such as the Employers Forum on Disability (now the Business Disability Forum) and the Olympic Delivery Authority. But the day of his accident remains fresh in his memory. He speaks about it with the detachment of an analytical medical student: “When anyone breaks their neck they have an expectation they will get better over three to four years. Within a year the university found me a council flat on the ground floor, the campus was surprisingly wheelchair friendly and I spent quite an enjoyable time being back as a student.”

But he says: “There was no integration then of disabled people at schools and university. Portraying myself in public as a person in a wheelchair at the pub was just too hard at first. It took about a year, and I had two stiff whiskies first.”

There have been many lessons in self-confidence along the way. When he first started his own business while still doing his PhD, he had a tendency to sell himself short. Going to speak about disability at Midland Bank (now HSBC) which had extended a loan, he asked only for the £50 cab fare in expenses – until it was suggested they pay him £300 as a day's fee.

Standing beside him all the way – he had proposed to her eight weeks before his accident – is his wife Rosie, who put her own physiotherapy degree on hold for a year.

They were married eight years after the accident. “Breaking your neck results in most bits not working, but it doesn’t result in those bits not working,” Mr Duckworth reveals. They have four children, all boys. All of them play rugby.

Secret CV

Who were your mentors?

Lord McColl, for getting me ‘on my feet’ and looking forward. Susan Scott-Parker, chief executive of the Business Disability Forum for her focus on making it easier to hire disabled people. And Geoff Lloyd, group HR director at Serco, for showing me how to function in a large organisation.

Your first big break?

You could say it was my neck I suppose! But it was indeed my accident, followed by the quick assurance that I could qualify as a doctor.

What else might you have done?

The only thing I would do differently is decide to work in a large organisation. At the time it took me out of my comfort zone – I had a misguided assumption they were large and uncaring. In fact, the huge drive and public sector ethos that runs through them in every sinew is empowering.

Best career advice to others

Try everything but make your own decisions.