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THE END OF THE BEGINNING

A stroke in one of the most inhospitable regions in the world led Kiwi businessman Roger Lampen to write an inspirational book about his road to rehabilitation.

LIFE WAS good. I was in my early sixties and fit and healthy (or so I thought), setting out to cycle across Tibet from Lhasa to Kathmandu, Nepal. It would be the ultimate journey across the roof of the world.

Along with six others, we were all raring to go and hit the road with energy and enthusiasm. They were all 10 to 30 years younger than I was and right into adventure cycling.

Nothing seemed to faze them. Once I got to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, however, I became apprehensive and was very tempted to pull out and head home, tail between my legs. It all seemed a step, or wheel revolution, too far. It was very different from anything I had done before. The training felt harder than usual, grinding out the

daily kilometres across hilly roads on a heavy mountain-bike and never feeling much fitter. But the momentum of the group and my reluctance to withdraw prevailed.

Before leaving home, I had been mapping out a book on cycle touring and had contemplated a chapter on this ride, headed "Ultimate Journey or Disastrous Failure". A prophetic title as it transpired. Even during our few days acclimatising in Lhasa, all was not well. Three of us developed chest infections and were generating masses of green phlegm with the consistency of spaghetti.

Despite that disconcerting omen, we started on our way. I cycled the relatively easy first day before being overwhelmed by my chest infection. On the morning of the third day, we broke camp well before dawn, in the darkest dark I had ever experienced, and set out to avoid the dawn security checkpoint closing the road for upgrading in preparation for the Beijing Olympics. We cycled and I struggled, with a feeling that my mind was somehow separate from my body. But I was determined to reach the top of the second of the seven or so high passes in the journey.

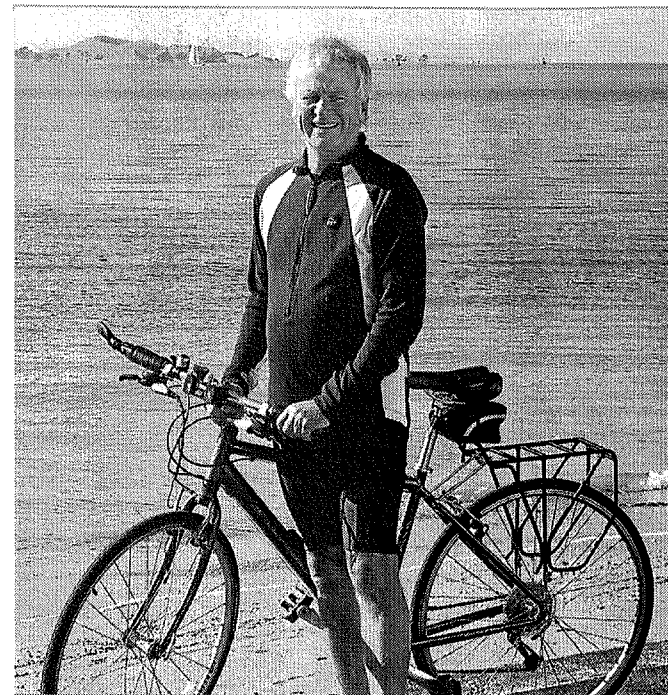
During the long climb I began to feel quite strange, as if I was floating off into oblivion. Fortunately our guide noticed something was wrong, took me off my bike and helped me into the

four-wheel-drive back-up vehicle. We later realised that this was a symptom of altitude sickness which, together with my chest infection, was knocking me about, both physically and mentally. We camped in a desolate spot in the middle of nowhere. I still felt strangely disconnected from myself. The next day was similarly spent in the support vehicle and then another isolated camping spot.

Two days later we had reached Shigatse, Tibet's second-largest city. We were staying in a hotel and I had the good fortune to have a ground-floor room, directly behind reception and looking out over the grounds of the hotel. I suddenly experienced an overwhelming series of shocks, as if all my electrical circuits had suddenly malfunctioned. My whole body was being overwhelmed by a series of seizures. It was the end of the beginning.

I called for help through the open window and soon had others in my room and, seemingly immediately, a local Chinese doctor. Next thing I was being carried fireman's-lift style to a taxi and to the hospital. I could talk, but my speech was very slurred and I couldn't stand or walk.

A preliminary diagnosis and scan confirmed I had suffered a stroke. I had reached hospital within the critical first three hours after the stroke, which would have been early enough



Hard road: Roger Lampen is fighting back.

to be treated with clotbusting drugs had I been in an advanced western hospital. But of course I was in the middle of Tibet. I was greatly disabled - unable to stand unsupported and lacking any co-ordination in my legs - and totally disoriented. I spent the night alone with a feeling of great apprehension.

The next day I travelled for five hours in a converted van ambulance over rough roads back to Lhasa and the Chinese military hospital there. A further scan, blood tests and examination confirmed the stroke. They also found that I was suffering from dehydration, high blood pressure, a chest infection and an inability to urinate because of my prostate going into rebellion. My cholesterol levels were also too high. I suspected at the

time, and later conversations with doctors have confirmed, that these pre-existing factors had made me more vulnerable to suffering a stroke. High blood pressure was probably the main factor, but dehydration thickens the blood, making it more viscous and increasing stroke risk.

My saving grace was the brother of one of our guides - appropriately named Karma - who could speak English and who borrowed significant amounts of money from his employer and from friends to ensure I wasn't thrown out on the street for not being able to pay. He also purchased a wheelchair to take me around the hospital. Brett also came back to Lhasa for a night to support me. He contacted my wife and tried to arrange for me to be sent home through my insurance

company. During my second night in this hospital, I truly felt I was going to die. My ankles were swelling, which the doctors considered a bad sign, and I was burning up with dehydration.

Fortunately my mobile phone still had power and I was able to make desperate, if rather slurred, calls to my wife and insurance company. Adding to the drama, I woke in the night to hot feet and an acrid burning smell. A visitor to the patient in the next bed had aimed to throw his cigarette butt into a rubbish bin beside me, but it had instead landed on the bed and set the blanket alight. To cap it all off, a hospital staff member came around first thing the following morning to charge me for the ruined blanket.

On the fourth day after my arrival, two angels, in the forms of a Chinese doctor and nurse who could both speak English, arrived from Beijing to evacuate me to Hong Kong. Initially they thought the weather was closing in and we would not be able to fly out that day. My first reaction was despair - I didn't think I could survive another night in Tibet. Further problems arose getting clearance to leave the hospital and then boarding the flight as the airline required that all passengers be able to board on foot - I was unable to walk. Security considerations and the Chinese determination to keep Tibet in relative isolation meant it was impossible to get permission for an air ambulance to fly in and out of the country. After further security hassles, we were finally able to board and leave Lhasa, the mountains and Tibet far behind.

■ Edited extract from *It's All in the Mind* by Roger Lampen. Published by Dunmore Publishing next week. RRP \$28.95.

■ Stroke Awareness Week runs from Sept 7-13.