

BY SAMANTHA BOH

HE was a healthy 29-year-old, chasing his next promotion, planning a holiday halfway across the world and enjoying the occasional drink with friends. He did not smoke.

One afternoon, in the office of the insurance company he worked for, a severe pain shot through his head. He started to feel dizzy. He was in the toilet and started throwing up violently. Somehow, he managed to text a friend for help.

When Mak Kwok Fai came to, he was at the hospital. He had suffered a haemorrhagic stroke and undergone brain surgery.

His first thought? "Why me, how can it happen when I'm so young," said Mr Mak, now 35 years old, and sharing his story with the world for the first time through a book titled *My Stroke Experience at 29*.

Speaking to *My Paper*, Mr Mak, now almost fully recovered apart from a slight slur in his speech and working again, said that depression often seized him in those days.

He spent a total of three months at the Singapore General Hospital. When he left, he was

At 29, a stroke of bad luck



SHARING HIS STORY: Mr Mak hopes that his book, which is being sold at \$10 each on strokeat29.com, raises awareness and gives stroke survivors hope. PHOTO: STEFFI KOH

wheelchair-bound, and neither able to speak nor write.

"Sometimes, I would throw a tantrum, and refuse to go for ther-

apy or do any exercises on my own," he said.

But then his mother would cry, and he would relent, realis-

ing that he owed it to her to recover. His mother had given up her job as a dental nurse to care for him full-time, even getting up at night to help him to the toilet, or to help shift his body into comfortable positions.

"She would say that people go through ups and downs, and that to reach the up is to move forward," said Mr Mak.

After six months of therapy, he was able to walk by himself and speak clearly enough to be understood.

The message he now wants to spread: Stroke does not happen only to the elderly. In fact, younger patients, who assume it cannot happen to them, may be caught unawares.

While stroke predominantly hits older people, younger ones who smoke, are obese, or suffering from hypertension, high cholesterol and diabetes are just as susceptible, said Deidre Anne De Silva, senior consultant at National Neuroscience Institute.

Associate Professor De Silva, who is also president of the Singapore National Stroke Association

(SNSA), said even though stroke is the fourth-highest cause of death, awareness of the condition here is "very poor".

"Many stroke patients do not recognise their symptoms as those of stroke, and seek medical help too late to be considered for proven acute treatments," she said.

Local studies have found that some waited for between 16 and 20 hours before going to hospital.

Some wait for their families to return home first, or hope that the symptoms will disappear on their own, instead of rushing to hospital, said Dr De Silva.

Mr Mak hopes that his book, which is being sold at \$10 each on strokeat29.com, raises awareness and gives stroke survivors hope. Part of the proceeds will go towards funding SNSA-run activities.

Noting that many stroke survivors become depressed because they are fixated on trying to figure out the cause of their stroke, which is not always clear, he said: "We cannot choose not to have (a stroke), but whatever happens, we must seize the moment and learn as much as we can, and grow as people."

samboh@sph.com.sg