Alysha M.

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Photo by Alysha M.

While working in Belize, I sustained a serious traumatic injury to my eye when a tree branch fell from height, striking me in the face. Because I was in a remote area, accessing care was difficult. I eventually made it to a big city where I saw a specialist who was concerned that I might have ruptured my globe. Despite pushback from my insurance company, the city hospital successfully advocated for me to be transferred to an eye hospital in Florida, where I got the good news that my globe was intact and I would not lose my eye. I wish everything had ended there, but it didn't.

After being repatriated to Canada and cleared by a Canadian ophthalmologist, I returned to Belize to work.

I knew how lucky I was to have walked away from such an injury seemingly unscathed, but I didn't feel fine. In fact, I had a really tough time. Excruciating migraines daily. Light sensitivity so bad I couldn't leave the house. It seemed that in addition to injuring my eye, I'd sustained a head injury. But when I followed up with the eye specialist who had seen me in Canada, he told me he had done all he could for me and that my headaches were probably stress related.

I hadn't expected to have chronic health problems from my injury. But, because of my ongoing symptoms, I decided to return permanently to my home province of New Brunswick, where I'd have more support. It's known that primary care is hard to access in New Brunswick, but I was fortunate to find a family doctor after only 9 months of waiting.

Alysha in Belize before her accident.

I was hopeful when my family doctor quickly referred me to a psychiatrist, ophthalmologist and physiatrist to explore the lasting symptoms from my injury. I was told I would need to see an eye specialist yearly for the rest of my life. I was also formally diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But I think that once I had the PTSD label, subsequent doctors used it to explain away debilitating physical symptoms associated with my head injury.

While I'm figuring things out with some guidance from my doctors, I'm largely on my own. It's interesting to be labelled as "lucky" and "recovered" despite feeling way off what I know to be my normal. To be told I look fine when I don't feel fine. I feel like a nuisance at appointments when I bring up any chronic issue — like my headaches.

I knew the limitations of the health care system in Belize when I chose to move there. But I was surprised to learn about the limitations of Canada's system — that it was somewhat ill equipped to deal with the chronicity and complexity of my injury when it didn't have a quick or easy solution.

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