

Surviving severe burns: 'I couldn't move ... I would tell myself it was a dream'

12 Dec, 2019 8:35pm



Aroha Andrew suffered burns to up to 68 per cent of her body in the house fire. Photo / Supplied

A young New Zealander who survived severe burns in a house fire says news from Whakaari/White Island "has just broken my heart".

Aroha Andrew was just 21 when she suffered severe burns to up to 68 per cent of her body after a house fire broke out while she was sleeping.

Now 25, the Timaru woman said hearing about the burns suffered by survivors of this week's volcanic eruption had hit her hard.

"I know what kind of journey they are stepping foot into. It is something you'd never wish on your worst enemy, let alone these people who are trying to enjoy a holiday, enjoy life. It just broke my heart to hear about the disaster."

Andrew was airlifted to Middlemore Hospital's specialist burns unit after the August 23 2016 fire. She would stay there for almost a year, before transfer to Timaru Hospital.

"Every day I woke up and would tell myself it was a dream and that, 'This isn't happening to me', because of what I had to go through every day, and waking up and not really being me anymore," she recalled.

"Everything about you gets stripped away. Your body is not what it was. I was a very independent young woman. As soon as I got in there I couldn't do anything by myself, just because of the severity of my burns - I couldn't move, I couldn't toilet, I couldn't brush my teeth. Every single little thing that we take for granted in life gets basically taken away from you, and everyone around you has to do it for you."

For the first few months the pain was constant, despite heavy doses of pain killers.

"They could manage it to a point where I wasn't screaming in agony every day. But when you have burns, especially on your back, or bum or if you are bed-ridden, every movement you make causes pain."



A photo taken when Aroha Andrew was in Middlemore Hospital after a fire in 2016. Photo / Supplied

Changing dressings could take hours, and for some time Andrew would be fully sedated before that happened. She'd hallucinate and struggle mentally with the high doses of ketamine given for her pain.

"People who haven't been through it could never understand the kind of pain. If you imagine the tiniest burn you get off the oven, how excruciating that is, times that by a trillion, million thousand ... everything affects it - the bandages, the air, the movement."

Andrew isolated herself and felt completely unable to deal with the outside world. Some people couldn't quite understand why they couldn't visit, send flowers or get back more information about how she was going.

"With an injury like this, people need time before they can open up their journey to other people," she said.

Massive support from her mother helped pull her through, as did the care of the burns unit staff, whom she credits with saving her life.

"They are some of the most understanding, compassionate people...what they gave for me, and what they are giving up right now for all the people up there; spending time with their families to help us. They are invaluable."

Andrew has also been involved with the Burns Support Group Charitable Trust, including attending events for other burns survivors. That helped her realise she wasn't alone.

She still has ongoing effects from her injuries, including heightened nerve sensitivity in some areas, and dulled feeling in others. However, she said the long and arduous recovery had left her stronger.

"To people who are going through this right now I would say you are going to feel down, you are going to go through all these emotions, you are going to feel pain, but at the end of the day you will come out of it a much stronger person with huge perspective on life and people."