



# After 101 days in hospital, this man is giving hope to doctors on COVID-19

Zach Hope

Jim Fenech is Australia's 101-day coronavirus miracle man.

The rock'n'roll-loving former steel worker spent 45 days on a ventilator in Sunshine Hospital ICU and another 56 recovering in the COVID-19 and rehabilitation wards in what may be our most astonishing coronavirus comeback yet.

His fight has become legendary in the corridors of Sunshine Hospital, where "reinvigorated" doctors and nurses know from Jim's experience that no matter how dire, "we can get people to the other side".

The 75-year-old required a tracheostomy – a tube directly into the throat – and on multiple occasions was presumed to have just hours left to live. So ravaged was his body that he had to relearn how to walk.

On July 6, Jim walked from hospital to a world vastly changed from the one he left on March 28, when people were still waking up to the crisis to come.

Unconscious through the worst of his stay, Jim is spared the memories of his near demise, but for his adult children, Jason and Susan, recounting the journey is enough to bring them to tears.

"That was the worst six weeks of our lives, mate," Jason says of his father's time in ICU, when no one could visit.

"The last conversation we had I said, 'Dad, you've always told us to be strong. Now it's your turn. What you told me is what I'm telling you.'

"I said, 'I know you're struggling to talk, but I want you to listen: me and Susan, we want to thank you for everything you've done for us. We love you. We will always love you. But you've got to fight now. You

make sure we see each other again.'

"I was preparing for those words to be the last words I ever spoke to my dad."

Jason and Susan cannot pinpoint where their father, who has always been active, picked up the virus but they know it hit him fast. One day he was visiting the doctor with mild pains and flu-like symptoms and by the next evening, they were told he might not make it to morning.

"Here we are about to lose my dad," Susan says. "My brother was in isolation [because he had been in contact with Jim] and we couldn't even grieve together. We've got dad dealing with it by himself. And then you've got the rest of the family dealing with it by themselves.

"This is at that time when you need someone to give you a hug but there's no one there. That's what makes this so horrible."

In what became typical in the "rollercoaster" journey, Jim inched back from the brink.

Once off the ventilator, he was barely responsive and there were fears he might have suffered a stroke. Jason became something of a translator, asking his father questions in Maltese and directing him to blink his answers.

The brain, beneath the fog, was still okay.

Jim lost about 18 kilograms in ICU and was so weak he had to relearn basic activities in

rehabilitation, but "he never gave up", says ICU liaison Linda Williams, speaking on behalf of the

large Sunshine Hospital and Allied Health teams.

"He was extremely determined and positive and did everything he was asked ... he was always looking

for the next step.

"To be that sick and make it through is an immense effort and achievement on his part and the people working for him."

Jim was the hospital's first COVID-19 case requiring intensive care and from his many ups and downs, the staff refined how they would help those who came later. This included the use of video-calling, even while Jim was unresponsive, to connect him to loved ones.

Ms Williams said doctors also learned from Jim's tracheostomy, a risky procedure for staff because it

causes the expulsion of aerosols from patients' throats.

Jim is now back home in Melton. His lungs are shot, his family says, and the fight goes on. But in Jim's limited English: "I had to build my body again. Now, not bad."

Even though he is weak, "he's telling me off again and it's great," Jason says. "He's back to his old attitude and that makes me happy."

The Fenechs are a private family and before today had only shared their story with close friends and family. They spoke to *The Sunday Age* in the hope it would prompt others to take the virus seriously and to thank the hospital staff who gave Jim a second chance at life.

"The nurses and the doctors, terrific," Jim says. "Believe me, my friend. Terrific."

"To be that sick and make it through is an immense effort and achievement on his part and the people working for him."

**Linda Williams, ICU liaison**



**Sunday Age, Melbourne**

19 Jul 2020, by Zach Hope

General News, page 10 - 705.00 cm<sup>2</sup>

Capital City Daily - circulation 98,214 (-----S)

ID 1304216819

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Jim Fenech, with son Jason, is back home after spending 101 days battling COVID-19 in hospital (inset). Photo: Penny Stephens