



Owlstone Riding Stables owner Donna Bonin is on the road to recovery after contracting an uncommon viral infection.

Woman on road to recovery after three months of paralysis

By TOM GAVEY
Staff Reporter

OAK HILLS — Donna Bonin's nightmare began last January.

Bonin first noticed something wrong when she had trouble mounting horses she had spent a lifetime riding and training.

"When it first came on, I had no idea what it was. I just couldn't walk and felt weak. The first thing I knew I couldn't get up on a horse," says the owner of Owlstone Riding Stables near Stirling.

By April she was paralysed and in Kingston General Hospital.

"It" turned out to be Guillian Barre Syndrome, a rare disease that destroys the insulation on nerve sheaths. The result is the nerves continue to function but can't transmit messages and the victim eventually succumbs to total paralysis.

"From April to June I was totally paralysed. However, once I started extensive physiotherapy, mainly swimming, I started to be able to move and everything else came along," says Bonin.

The good news for Bonin is that many people who contract the disease recover within a year and regain all motor skills.

"There is no real medication to treat the disease. It's just time that does the healing."

The 44-year-old lost her husband Oscar to cancer last April.

"People I think have been reluctant to call or visit since I became sick. I just want them to know I'm getting back to normal and Owlstone is open for business," she says.

She and her husband bought Owlstone 15 years ago. Today there are 38 horses used for training riders. Bonin also boards horses.

Guillain Barre Syndrome is uncommon in this region but Bonin says she knows of five cases in the Stirling area in the past three years.

"The Ministry of the Environment tested the soil and water and all of the tests came out negative. There haven't been any answers," says Bonin.

She theorizes spraying for gypsy moths in the area may have in-

roduced something into the ground water. However, Bonin stresses she has no concrete facts to back up the theory.

"That's the only thing different around here in the past five years. Still, no one has been able to explain it."

However, Medical Officer of Health Dr. Jim Pfaff of the local health unit says he is not aware of any environmental triggers for the disease.

"It's a viral illness associated with a number of things. It can come after surgery and some immunization shots. There's nothing environmental that's been found as far as I'm aware," says Pfaff.

He adds the health unit is aware of the cases in the Stirling-Oak Hills area and has monitored reports from doctors in the area.

Bonin is now to the point where she uses an electric wheelchair or walker to move around. She has found one of the most successful forms of therapy has been an old standby — riding.