

interview 

Situations critical

Saving lives is all in a day's work for Jeffrey Lipman who has dealt with everything from shootings in Soweto to bombings in Bali

Photograph // Richard Waugh



“The violence started with stabbings but as guns became more available there were **MORE AND MORE SHOOTINGS**”

WITH PHIL BROWN



Theoretically, at least, intensive care specialist Professor Jeffrey Lipman should have given it away years ago. After all, the 60-year-old medico has been at the coal face of one of the most stressful fields of medicine for three decades and has been director of Intensive Care Medicine, Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital (RBWH), since 1997. Not many in his field last that long.

“The burnout rate is high,” Jeff admits. “The emotional stress can create problems for some people. But you learn to adapt and cope, if you have a burning desire to do the work. The data shows that if you are passionate and enjoy what you are doing the burnout rate is low, however. What keeps me going is the fact that I love the job, our ability to make a difference and to improve practice by research.”

Jeff will be talking about that at a lunch to raise research funds for the RBWH Foundation this Sunday (Aug 16) at Dell'Ugo Ristorante Italiano, New Farm. Hosts Giuseppe and Gloria Robertiello say helping raise money for the foundation which, in turn, funds the Burns, Trauma and Critical Care Research Centre, is a pretty good reason to set aside a few hours to indulge in good food and fine wine.

A special guest will be a family friend of the Robertiellos and one of Jeff Lipman's “miracle” patients, Sasha Maggiolo, 34, dubbed “the 1-million dollar woman” by *The Courier-Mail* after her expensive but life-saving treatment

at RBWH's Intensive Care Unit (ICU) in 2007. She is living proof that the unit, which costs the Queensland Government more than \$30m a year to run, is worth every penny.

Sasha's life was saved by the ICU team after a motorbike accident. So close to dying was she that a Catholic priest administered the last rites. She hovered between life and death for weeks but staff at the ICU never gave up on her.

“They are an amazing group of men and women,” Sasha says. “I owe my life to several people there.” That life is now almost back to normal. She's returned to her work in administration at EPOCA Constructions, the company owned by her father, Gilberto, and Jeff Lipman says Sasha's case is the sort of inspirational story that keeps him and his dedicated team inspired to do their work.

“Sasha has touched the whole unit,” Jeff says. “We really didn't think she'd survive but she and her parents were just so determined.”

Thankfully, the ICU, staffed by more than 200 nurses and 40 doctors, has a high success rate. This good news story is often overshadowed by the negative press that Queensland Health has had in recent years. Approximately 2500 patients a year are treated at the unit and 92 per cent of patients leave the hospital alive.

“We now have one of the top units in the country,” Jeff Lipman says. “I don't want to boast but I can say that we offer as good, if not better, outcomes than any other unit in Australia.”

It's by no means an overnight success story for the South African-born doctor who started working in intensive care in Johannesburg in 1978. His early experience in the field, working at Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto, on Johannesburg's outskirts, was a baptism of fire.



REASON TO SMILE ... Sasha Maggiolo owes her life to Jeff Lipman and the RBWH Intensive Care Unit

“It's a violent place now and was pretty violent back then too,” Jeff says. “We could see shootings over taxi turf wars happening just outside our office windows. The violence started with stabbings but as guns became more available there were more and more shootings and people progressed to using AK47s.”

Jeff left South Africa in 1997 and came to Brisbane with his physiotherapist wife Mariana and son David, now 21. He has become an internationally renowned expert who writes extensively on intensive care treatment, lectures worldwide and also is Professor of Anaesthesiology and Critical Care, University of Queensland, and director of the Burns, Trauma and Critical Care Research Centre based at the RBWH.

His unit was the destination for a number of burns victims after the Bali bombings in 2002. The government funds this important work but not the research that underpins much of it. Around \$200,000 per annum now goes into research but more is needed so that people like Jeff Lipman can continue to save lives.

“That's what gets me up in the morning,” Jeff says. People like Sasha Maggiolo are glad it does.

SPORTING CHANCE LUNCH, Sun, Aug 16, 12pm, \$95, Dell'Ugo Ristorante Italiano, 693 Brunswick St, New Farm, ph: 3254 2188.
www.rbwhfoundation.com.au