

Belief important to walk again — Scott

by John Aldworth

IT takes just seconds for Scott Chesney to show you what it really means to be paralysed.

You place your wrist flat on the table with all fingers bent back except the ring finger which is extended forward. Now try to lift ring finger. Even with every muscle and cell straining you'll find you can't.

And that, says 29-year-old Scott, is how it has felt for him for the last 14 years whenever he has tried to move his lower torso.

The New Jersey native, paralysed by a rare stroke in the spinal cord at age 15, is on a world tour of possible cures for his condition and that of millions of others around the world confined to wheelchairs by paralysis.

Dubbed Devotion to Motion his world tour is being taken in the hope of a miracle held out by belief centres as far apart (geographically and spiritually) as the Roman Catholic shrines at Lourdes and Fatima (Portugal) and those of Hindu gurus in a string of Indian cities ranging from Bangalore to Dharamsala.

In between, Scott and his Indian-born wife Pratiksha (pictured here with Scott) popped into Hamilton last week to see a New Age seer and learn about the work Life Unlimited does for Waikato's disabled.

He has been to China to see the medicine-less approach of qi jong where practising a combination of meditation and vigorous body movements for up to 12 hours a day is said to offer some hope of movement for the disabled.

"I saw one man who stayed tied to a fence all day doing qi jong in the hope of getting the signals through to persuade his muscles to work again".

But, while his and Chinese hopes burn bright, Scott confesses neither they nor he know of anyone who has walked again as a result of such exercises, although many are fitter and happier.

Nevertheless he believes there is a cure out there somewhere. "For some, spiritual techniques may be the answer. Some paraplegics have healed themselves; sometimes the cellular memory recalls what the spinal cord looks like and duplicates it."

Scott and Pratiksha, who holds a Masters in physical therapy, see their mission as "gaining access to a blueprint for healing that is not only physical but emotional and spiritual also".

Sponsored by some heavyweight American corporates such as Tyco, Scott says he is fired by "a belief beyond measure" in the possibility of a cure.

"It may come through medical advances, spiritual healing or a breakthrough in understanding myself and why this has happened to me — but it will come," he insists.

While believing in God "as something much larger than us", Scott maintains there is a moral lesson to be learned in his paralysis.

"As a teenager I was all into football, basketball and baseball. You couldn't tie me down. Then along came paralysis. It was as though something

inside me was saying: Hey, you've got to slow down.

"But that was 15 years ago. I've learned the lesson. I'm ready to be healed and walk again."

Walking again is Scott's dream, "and I have to have a dream to believe in and work toward that dream".

However, he also has a mission: to help others in the same condition, through public speaking and counselling. "Giving to others has given me the gift of life and the truth is I've been blessed with a wonderful wife, friend and companion in Pat and a great adventure to share with her."

But he acknowledges that in the "quest for healing" there are many lessons to be learned. "For example, if I want to walk again I have to face up to the part of me that enjoys being paralysed. Would I get all the love and attention I enjoy now if I walked again?"

Before his travels, which began in 1997 with a 15-month, 15-country world tour to research over 40 different complementary medicines, Scott worked with the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis as a fund-raiser and public speaker. He will return to the US in July to share the findings from the current trip with those seeking their own escape from wheelchair imprisonment.

Worse than being physically paralysed is the "emotional paralysis" Scott believes affects us all. For him life in a wheelchair is a journey in which he will learn and grow regardless of the outcome. Like paralysed Superman actor Christopher Reeve he is hot on the quest of a cure, but beneath the searching acknowledges it may never come.

It's about meeting challenges, getting past the sadness and anger, travelling back in time to make peace with the past and venturing in the future to embrace change.

An activist, he deplors the plight of many paralysis victims who never face the challenge of earning their own living, surviving instead of insurance payouts (in the United States) or on disability allowances in New Zealand.

He worked his way through college and university to graduate with a major in communications and a minor in political science. "I've never let a wheelchair stop me paying my own way and moving forward in life."

He praises New Zealand's removal of the right to sue in accident cases. "In the States it's a huge industry and there are thousands of disabled who have received huge settlements and just live on them."

Too many other paraplegics commit suicide, he says, because they refuse to examine why loss of movement has come upon them.

"The biggest lesson to learn is that how much more than your physical body you really are." That's a tough ask, especially for active 18-25-year-old males who make up 75 per cent of paralysis victims.