

Learning to Use a Speaking Valve

Jack Rushton interviewed by Julie Kobak, M.A., CCC-SLP/L, Vice President of Clinical Education, Passy-Muir, Inc., Irvine, California, JKobak@passy-muir.com

What circumstances led you to a tracheostomy and living with a ventilator?

Jack: August 1, 1989, I was body surfing with my son and his friends at Laguna Beach, California. I was riding a wave into shore when I hit my forehead on a submerged rock. I was immediately paralyzed, couldn't move my arms or legs to swim and could only see the swirling seawater all about me. I blacked out, but my son and his friend got me to shore, where lifeguards did CPR until the paramedics arrived.

Two hours later I woke up in the hospital surrounded by doctors and nurses. A nurse said, "Mr. Rushton, you have had a bad accident. If you understand what I am saying, blink your eyes once." I understood perfectly what was going on, blinked my eyes once, and heard a collective sigh of relief from everyone in the room. Tests revealed that my spinal cord had been severed between the second and third cervical vertebrae. From that day 21 years ago, I have been kept alive by a ventilator breathing for me.

How did you communicate immediately after you were trached?

Jack: For a month, not being able to move any part of my body and not being able to speak was a very frustrating and frightening situation. I felt extremely vulnerable not being able to communicate even my most basic needs. I wanted so badly to have my

teeth brushed and my glasses brought to me, for example.

One morning while still in the ICU, I was running a fever and feeling claustrophobic. I felt that if I couldn't get relief of some kind I would just die – in fact dying would have been a great relief from the misery I was in. Nurses walked by glancing at me, but not being able to communicate, I could not elicit their help.

Thankfully, a good friend came in, saw the panic in my eyes, felt how hot I was and immediately began to bathe my face and arms with ice water. The nurses realized the seriousness of the situation, and soon I was cooled down and feeling at peace once again. How dangerous it is to be in a hospital without the ability to communicate!

About a week after my accident, a good friend created a series of charts that helped a great deal. By pointing a finger at different items on the charts and my blinking once for "yes" and twice for "no," I was able to communicate my basic needs. The chart was so ingeniously put together that I could even indicate what books and Scriptures I wanted to have read to me.

When and how was the Passy-Muir Valve introduced to you?

Jack: After two weeks at the regional trauma center, I was transferred to Rancho Los Amigos Rehabilitation Hospital in Downey, California.

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Jack Rushton

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Immediately upon arriving, the doctor in charge of the spinal cord injury unit deflated my cuffed trach, and I was able to speak my first words. How encouraging that was to me and my family!

After several weeks the trach was no longer cuffed, and I thought I was speaking pretty well, even though there were long pauses between my words which was frustrating. If it never gets better than this, I thought, I will just learn how to deal with it.

After I had been at Rancho almost two months, a speech pathologist and a respiratory therapist introduced me to the Passy-Muir Valve. They said that it would help me to speak much better and without long pauses.

Was it easy to use the first time you tried it?



Jack enjoying a moment with his wife and granddaughter.

Jack: The first time I used the Passy-Muir Valve was a very frustrating experience. It was like having a hurricane in my head. The valve forces you to exhale through your nose or mouth. Without the valve in place, you can be totally passive and the respirator will inhale and exhale for you. It is so easy and comfort-

able that one is tempted not to try anything else that requires effort.

My doctor, sensing my initial frustration, told me not to worry about it and that my life could be okay without the Passy-Muir Valve. The speech pathologist and respiratory therapist, as well as my family, encouraged me to use it. They knew, and I came to know, how much better I could speak when the valve was in place.

I was making so many other adjustments at that time that the Passy valve was not a high priority for me. When I left Rancho after six months, I was only using the Passy valve periodically.

At home, however, my family and friends really pushed me to use the valve. They encouraged me to increase my daily time using it, and I did. The day finally came when I had the Passy valve in all day without even realizing it. Since that day, more than 20 years ago, the Passy valve has been an important part of my life. I do a great deal of teaching and motivational speaking, as well as spending hours each day on my computer using voice recognition software. The thing I enjoy most is that I am able to interact and carry on conversations with my wife, children and grandchildren. I shudder to think what my life might have been like without it.

What do you find are the most significant benefits to using the Passy-Muir Valve?

Jack: The greatest benefit is to be able to speak in a fluid and powerful way. I also have learned that with the Passy valve in place I have fewer secretions and don't need to be suctioned as frequently. I believe it helps my general health because it forces me to exhale through my nose, and through the years, I have not had any sinus infections.

You write a series of "Observations" in which you provide insight and perspectives into important life issues. What advice do you offer people for living with a trach in regard to communication?

Jack: First, my "Observations" are posted on <http://apps.facebook.com/blogged/blogs/observations-by-jack-rushton/>.

▷ It is a frightening thing to have a trach and not know what your future ability to communicate will be. My advice to anyone who has this procedure is to go forward with faith and confidence that with the Passy valve you will be able to communicate in a normal and natural way. I'm a slow learner and perhaps others can adapt to the valve more quickly than I did.

I think it's so important not to give up in the beginning, but to be persistent. By using the Passy-Muir Valve, you will find that it gets better and better. In fact, it will get so good that you won't even realize you are using it until you try to get along without it. ▲

Calendar

September 18-22. European Respiratory Society 20th Annual Congress, Barcelona, Spain. www.ersnet.org

October 30–November 4. CHEST, American College of Chest Physicians Annual Conference. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. www.chestnet.org

November 21, 9:00am–2:30 pm. Breathing & Sleep II. Salk Institute for Biological Studies, La Jolla, California. www.salk.edu/breathingandsleep or contact Gladys Swensrud, 858-271-9288, swensrud@pacbell.net

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