

From darkness to **LIGHT**

When Mary Penniken joined Absa 20 years ago, she had no idea that her move into the banking world and her automatic Bankmed membership would one day save the life of her son. By Lynne Gidish



Mary Penniken was 31 when her husband was brutally assaulted. 'It was an enormous shock when he died of his injuries,' recalls the mother of four, who works in the cheque verification department for Integrated Processing Solutions (IPS). 'We had no medical aid and I realised that if he had been at a private hospital, he may have survived. At the time I was working as a cashier in a retail store and had no medical benefits, which is why I decided to make the move into the banking world.'

Mary had no need to call on Bankmed for assistance as there were no major health issues while her children were growing up. But things started going wrong when her son Fazel reached his mid-teens and began running wild with the wrong crowd. 'There was a great deal of peer pressure to experiment with a

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whole lot of things. Although Fazel never did hard drugs, he became completely hooked on sniffing glue. Eventually, during his Matric year, he went quite out of his mind, becoming totally incoherent and barely functioning. He had a complete breakdown.'

It was an extremely difficult time of great family upheaval. Fazel was continually disruptive and, at times, Mary had to call in the police. Her other children often had to intervene, so there were family arguments. 'I was under a lot of stress and strain,' she says. 'He was in and out of

WHAT IS SCHIZOPHRENIA?

Schizophrenia is a disease of the brain that affects one in a 100 people worldwide. According to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) it usually strikes in the late teenage and early adult years. Schizophrenia has nothing to do with split personalities or multiple personalities. It is believed to occur as a result of a disturbance in the development of the brain, most likely as a result of genetic factors, although environmental factors may play a role. Schizophrenia is not caused by psychological conflicts, stress or drug abuse. Sometimes these factors seem to be important in precipitating an acute episode of illness, but this is only believed to occur in individuals who are otherwise predisposed to

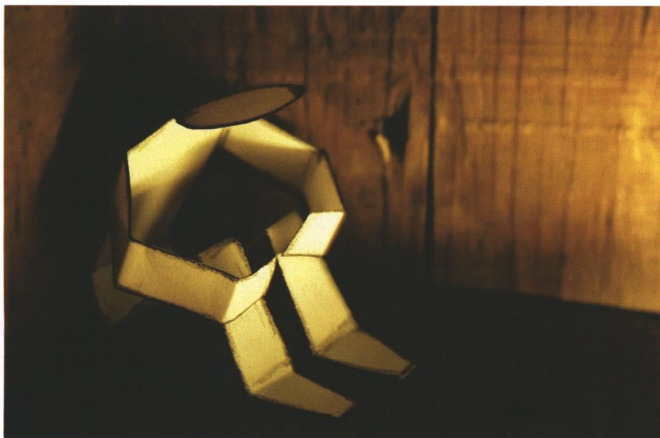
develop schizophrenia. Recent studies have suggested the use of illicit drugs may increase the chance of someone with a genetic vulnerability to develop schizophrenia. Medications that were discovered in the 1950s have been proven to be effective for many of the symptoms of schizophrenia. Some people will have complete resolution of all their symptoms with their use, and many are able to lead productive lives once their medication has been stabilised. Hallucinations, paranoia and delusions often improve over a number of weeks, as will social withdrawal and apathy. Unfortunately there are side effects to the medication, but it does need to be taken chronically as the risk of becoming ill again is extremely high if it's stopped.

hospital and several rehab clinics. The fact that Bankmed took the pressure off by paying all the medical bills in full was an enormous help. They also stood by me when my younger son, Sheldon, needed brain surgery following an injury during an assault similar to his dad's.'

Soon afterwards, Fazel was diagnosed with schizophrenia. 'I knew nothing about the condition. Once again, Bankmed came to the party. They covered all his medication costs plus his regular visits to the psychiatrist. They continue to do so, which takes a huge load off my shoulders. His medicine is expensive, but it's something he can't live without – it keeps him on an even keel.'

For the next few years, things ran pretty smoothly in the Penniken household. Fazel lived at home and





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found a job, took his medication and stayed clean. Until earlier this year, when, at the age of 26, his behaviour changed. 'I knew there was something going on,' admits Mary. 'I confronted him at the end of April about being back on the glue, trying my best to reason with him. He denied it, of course. On 12 May, I returned from work, feeling very concerned about the fact that he was losing his mind again because of the drug. He was not home. I searched the whole area and found him hours later, walking the streets with glue in his hand. He ran away from me and only came back later that night.'

Mary was distraught. Fazel's mind had gone haywire due to the glue. The family finally got him to bed, after trying unsuccessfully to find his stash. She woke up in the early hours of the morning to an all-too-familiar smell and went to his room.

'I saw him try to hide the glue and took it away from him. I was very upset and determined to destroy the drug that was destroying my child. I ran into the kitchen and poured paraffin over the container so that I could burn it, but Fazel struggled

with me and grabbed it just as the flame caught. The paraffin fell on him and his lower body caught alight. It was the worst moment of my life.'

Fazel suffered 30 to 39 percent burns on his neck, trunk, arms and legs and was in ICU for three months, most of it under sedation. He was then transferred to rehab. Although he is still undergoing skin transplants, he was allowed to go back home in September. Once again, says Mary, Bankmed never let her down, paying for all his medical bills without asking any questions.

'It's extremely difficult for any parent who has a child with a mental illness, and it's even worse when there's a drug addiction involved too. As a mother, all you want is for your

USEFUL CONTACT NUMBERS

- SADAG Toll-free Helpline: 0800-753-379; SMS: 31393; Website: www.sadag.org.
- Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder Association (SABDA): 011-783-1564.
- Schizophrenia Foundation: 0860-100-541.

child to be well and safe. This is not a journey you can do alone. You need a lot of support, and that's exactly what Bankmed has given me.

'I felt very guilty about the accident, but when Fazel came round his doctors told him it had happened because I had fought for him and had tried to prevent the self-destruction that's part of his addiction and illness. We still have a long road ahead of us, but I remain very positive that he will recover fully.

'Through all the trauma, Bankmed has been there for me, which has meant great peace of mind. But most of all, Bankmed saved my son's life. If I did not have them at my side, Fazel, like his dad, would have been treated in a state hospital. One of his doctors told me he didn't think Fazel would have made it there, because he wouldn't have been given the same treatment. Bankmed has given me back my son, and for that I'm extremely grateful.' **B Lynne Gidish holds the Pfizer Mental Health Journalism Award for 2012/2013.**

The Bankmed Individual Stress Assessment (ISA) can help you assess your mental health status. It is available on the Bankmed website at www.bankmed.co.za. Bankmed has a Special Care Programme for depression which offers support and guidance to members diagnosed with this illness. For more information, phone 0800-BANKMED (0800-226-5633).

