

LEST WE FORGET

>>>Neuropsychologist Dr. Sallie Baxendale on the realities of amnesia

Never let it be said that Hollywood is not committed to medical accuracy. After all, it's given us an accurate and poignant portrayal of amnesia through, er, a forgetful fish.

"Dory from Finding Nemo is a great illustration of the annoyance and confusion that arises when someone is amnesic," says Dr. Sallie Baxendale, consultant neuropsychologist at the National Hospital For Neurology.

In film terms, amnesia is usually little more than a useful plot device involving (a) someone getting hit on the head, thus (b) forgetting something which results in (c) tragic or hilarious consequences. In real life, naturally, things are more complicated.

"Amnesia has two basic causes," explains Dr. Baxendale. "One is physical, when the brain is damaged. That usually happens after head injury, but can also result from drug or alcohol abuse. The other is psychological. This is when your consciousness doesn't allow you access to certain memories. It tends to occur after periods of severe psychological stress. People who have this kind of disorder cannot live with who they are, so they just ditch that identity."

Despite movie amnesia popping up in everything from 50 First Dates to Memento, the real thing's relatively rare, meaning genuine cases tend to make the news. In 1999 a man walked into a hospital in Toronto claiming he didn't know who he was. But his linguistic abilities were intact — he spoke fluent French and Italian and could read Latin. Staff diagnosed him with post-concussive global amnesia and gave him the name Philip Staufen. The media dubbed him "Mr. Nobody". Who was he really? Nobody knows. After refusing free treatment, starring in several TV shows and finding himself on the wrong side of Canadian immigration officials, Mr. Nobody disappeared.

But the most-studied amnesiac of recent years doesn't even have a name. An operation intended to cure "Patient HM"'s epilepsy left him with profound anterograde amnesia. Like Memento's Leonard Shelby, HM has lost the ability to form new memories. All he can remember are events that took place after his operation in 1953.

Can amnesia be cured? "Depends on the amnesia," says Dr. Baxendale. "If it's brain damage, no. You can't actually mend the brain. If it's due to psychological reasons, then with lots and lots of therapy... Maybe."

LUCY JOLIN