



'I was terrified that I would die any minute'
 When Birmingham City FC managing director **Karren Brady** went for a routine health check, it changed her life – and almost certainly saved it. Here she talks about the emergency brain surgery that followed

I have always been really healthy and had never had a day off sick. I have a very busy life, as well as being the managing director of Birmingham City FC since I was 23. I sit on the boards of Channel 4, Mothercare and Sport England, and I am chairman of Kerrang! (a rock radio station). I write a couple of newspaper columns and work six days a week because of the football, and – the most important thing – I have two children, Sophia, aged nine, and Paulo, who is seven. Though I don't have time to go to the gym, I am fit and active, and have a healthy diet.

It was just fate that I decided to go for a health screening, and I am incredibly grateful I did. I had had an allergic reaction, probably to nuts, and wanted to get to the bottom of it so I went to a company called Preventicum that offers state-of-the-art screening, including a full-body MRI scan. It took a whole day to have all the tests done and I couldn't stay for my results.

The next day I was at my desk when they called to say the radiologist had discovered a brain aneurysm – a potentially fatal weakening in a brain artery that could rupture at any time. My uncle died of a ruptured aneurysm in his early 40s and my financial director also had one, although he had surgery and is fine now, so I knew what it was. I was absolutely shocked. I didn't feel ill at all.

I needed urgent treatment to prevent it from rupturing and went to see a neurologist the next day. I wanted to know if I would even make it to the next day. As soon as I had finished speaking to the radiologist, I went straight on to the internet. I was probably born with the aneurysm (it can be hereditary). Not all aneurysms will rupture, but the likelihood is cumulative and at 36, my chances of a rupture had become greater. With a rupture, a third of people are fine, a third are disabled and a third die. The more you read on the internet, the worse it gets – you panic. I was terrified that I would die or have a stroke at any minute. The

only time I cried was looking at the brain aneurysm foundation website: it was so frightening. My main fear was for my children – it seemed so unfair on them.

My husband, Paul Pescisolido, was very calm and has helped me think things through every step of the way. I wanted the neurologist to tell me it was straightforward but when I said to him, "I'm a mother, I just can't die," he replied "God, you've got two kids – I'm surprised you survived childbirth." I felt quite sick at that point. He explained that there were two

treatment options: clipping it to stop any blood entering it, making it shrivel up, which would involve a full craniotomy, or having it "coiled", where they thread a catheter up through the groin and fill the aneurysm with tiny coils of metal, blocking it, and preventing a rupture. He wanted to clip it.

I was feeling pretty down after seeing him so I went to the Wellington hospital in London for a second opinion and talked to two more doctors – a clipping and a coiling specialist. They were wonderful and far more sensitive than the first doctor. Between them, they decided coiling would be best. The main risks were rupture during the procedure, bleeding or a stroke during or after surgery, which could leave me disabled or dead. I still have about a 5% risk of stroke which doesn't sound a lot, but when you're faced with it, it's bloody awful.

In the seven days between deciding on the treatment and having surgery,

I was in such a state of shock. I felt a sort of sadness that it had happened to me – you do think, why me? I realised how fragile life was. What really scared me, though, was the thought of my children being without me. I told them I had to go to London for a routine procedure, as I didn't want to worry them. I had to tell my staff and the people at the newspapers so it got out into the news – my nanny kept having to turn down the radio so my kids wouldn't hear about me.

The date was looming. I kept working but work is not a distraction – I was thinking about the operation all the time. Paul stayed with the children while I went for the surgery. I didn't do any dramatic goodbyes or think, this might be the last time I hug you. I wouldn't let myself go there. I just presumed that if I died they would have to get on with it.

I was very nervous about the operation. It took five and a half hours and the first thing I asked when I woke up was whether they had managed to coil it. They told me it went well, but I knew that the first 24 hours were critical – you could have a stroke, a bleed or a rupture and die or be disabled at any time. I literally didn't sleep for that 24 hours. I just sat in intensive care, surrounded by very sick people, and watched that clock tick by. No one really tells you what to expect. Whenever you get a twinge you think, I'm going, I'm going, I'm going. I still have that to a degree, more than two months later.

Brady, back at work in Birmingham...
'My nanny kept down the radio so my kids wouldn't hear about me being ill'

I had a scan this week and it looks as if the aneurysm has closed up already. It shouldn't reopen. I'll have to have brain scans for the rest of my life but I haven't asked what my prognosis is. I don't want to be too dramatic. Faced with this sort of thing, people either realise they have to change their life dramatically or they realise how happy they are and that is how it affected me.

Initially, I did think I should spend more time with my children – you just want to gather them up – but for two months after the operation I was working from home and realised I didn't see more of them anyway. Still, there will never be a time again when I choose a board meeting over a sports day. I have been back in the office for three weeks now and feel really well – my mortality is back in my own hands

Karren Brady was talking to Lucy Atkins
www.preventicum.co.uk

Photograph: Andrew Fox