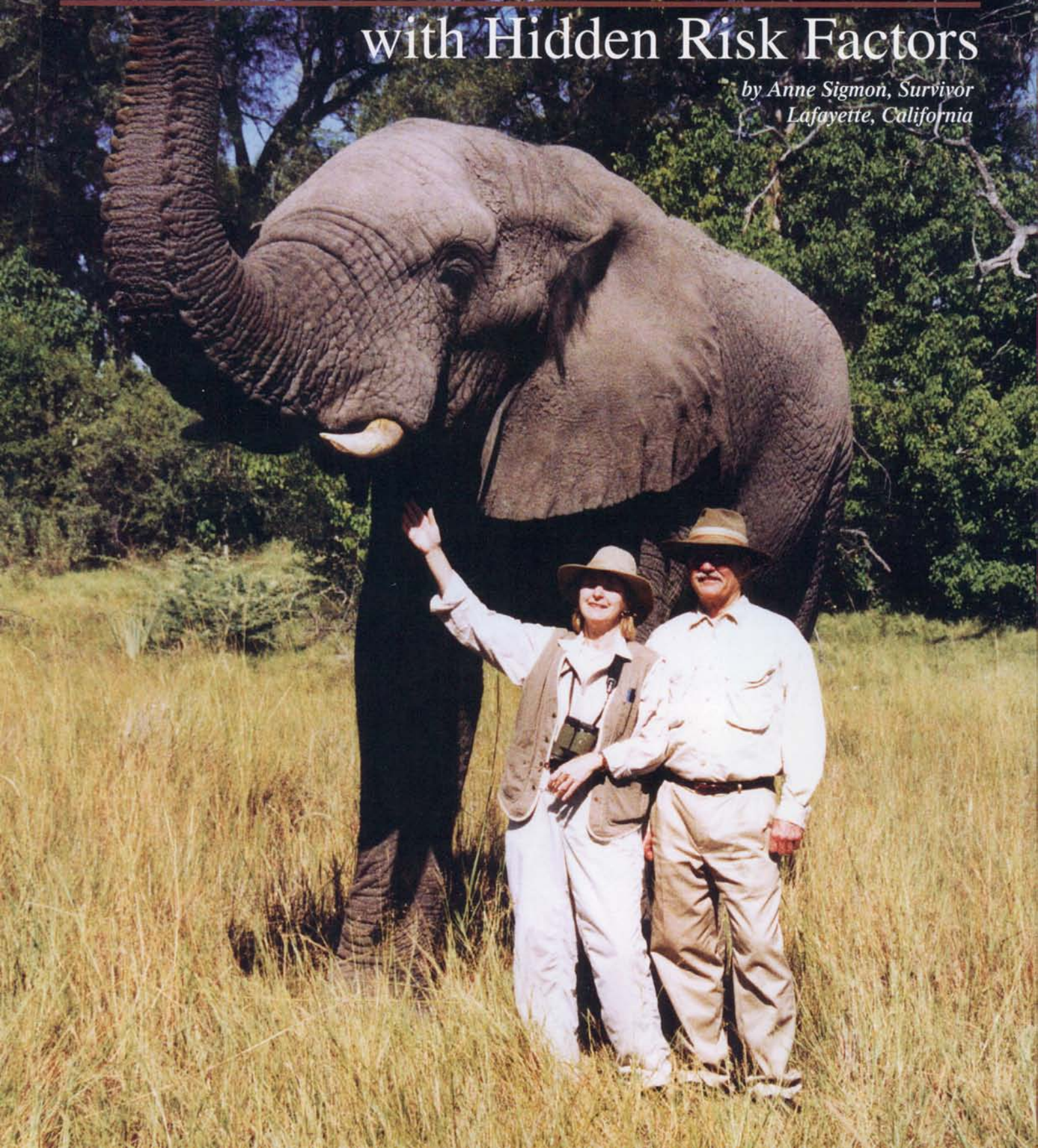


COLLISION

with Hidden Risk Factors

*by Anne Sigmon, Survivor
Lafayette, California*





I WAS DUMBOUNDED AFTER IT HAPPENED. HOW COULD I HAVE HAD A STROKE? ONLY 48 YEARS OLD AND PERFECTLY HEALTHY. AVERAGE WEIGHT, WORKOUTS TWICE A WEEK. NO RISK FACTORS. NONE. OR SO I THOUGHT. IF I'D KNOWN WHAT TO LOOK FOR, I MIGHT HAVE SEEN IT COMING. THERE WERE HINTS, TINY HINTS.

Lafayette, California — June 12, 2001: I plopped the breakfast dishes in the sink. Forget the hair and makeup, I thought as I headed downstairs to my home office. Late. I'd started the day with a nagging migraine. Nothing serious — just one of those minor annoyances I'd had for years. But they seemed to be more frequent of late.

I had to hustle. I had until noon to finish a press release about my client's renovation of a 1930s hangar that once housed bombers bound for Pearl Harbor.

Tony's got to approve it today or we'll miss the magazine's deadline. Tony was my principal public relations client — a client that in this perilous economy I needed to keep.

Pretty good story, I thought, as I looked over the draft. But strange typos: 'height' was written as 'right.' 'Core' was written as 'bore' — rhyming mistakes that didn't come from a missed finger on the keyboard. I never make typos like that. Happened last week, too.

I hit 'send' with 5 minutes to go before the noon deadline.

Five months later — November 2: "What's for dinner?" my husband Jack asked as I straggled in with the groceries at 5:30 Friday afternoon. He'd just returned home from a week traveling on business.

"Fresh salmon," I said. "Oh and a movie, too, a Bruce Willis flick."

"Which one?"

"Umm... umm?" I couldn't remember.

I fumbled through the bag to read the label.

"*Unbreakable*."

"We've already seen it," he said.

"You saw it at the hotel?"

"No, we've seen it. You rented it three weeks ago. Don't you remember?"

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. *Unbreakable*. The one about the train wreck."

Six weeks after that — December 27: I panted into Café Della Stella 15 minutes late to meet my friend Ellen for dinner and a play afterwards.

"Sorry I'm late. I couldn't find my purse. Then I picked up the dentist's bill instead of the tickets. I had to go back home to get them."

"Don't worry about it," Ellen said. "I'm enjoying my wine."

"I never used to be this scatterbrained."

"We're all getting to that age," Ellen laughed. "I prefer to think of us as creatively quirky." At 52, she had four years on me.

"I like that better," I said.

But "creatively quirky" incidents had been piling up on me in recent months. All of my friends — my doctor, even — chalked it up to hormones. I wasn't so sure. I wasn't having any symptoms of menopause. With my doctor's approval, I still took birth control pills, as I had for 20 years.

"How's work?" Ellen asked. She knew I was anxious to beef up my project workload.

"A few glimmers. I have a good feeling about the new energy project."

"You worried about Enron?" Ellen asked.

"I don't think one bad apple will take down an entire industry, do you?"

"Probably not," she agreed.

Ellen raised her glass. "Here's to 2002 — it's going to bloom," she said.

"You betcha."

But 2002 didn't bloom for the California economy — or for me. A month after my dinner with



Ellen, I was alone in the house mentally reviewing my to-do list. It was January 30, 2002 — a rainy Wednesday workday. Out of the blue, my right arm went numb — just fell asleep, I thought. Probably nothing serious. I wasn't in pain.

But 15 minutes later the arm was still numb and I couldn't seem to think straight. Should I call someone? I couldn't remember how to reach my husband. What good would that do? I rationalized. He's out of town.

Then it dawned on me — I couldn't quite grasp his name.

I stared at the phone: How do you call emergency? What letters? What numbers? I didn't know. What's wrong with me? All I could do was press "0."

The operator's voice was crisp on the line. "May I help you?"

I opened my mouth to speak but the sounds were unintelligible. "H-H-He." "H-He-H-He." Panic. Oh, no. She's going to hang up. She'll think I'm a kid playing with the phone, or a crank or a drunk.

She didn't hang up. When I couldn't remember my address, she traced the call and sent an ambulance.

I never saw the stroke coming.

Before that day, I would have guessed that most strokes happen to the elderly or to smokers or those who have high blood pressure or cholesterol or heart disease.

I would have been right. Those are the "big" risk factors.

But there are other risks — risks especially important for women under 55. Risks that aren't as well known. Risk factors like migraine headaches. Taking estrogen either for birth control or hormone replacement. And autoimmune diseases such as lupus, arthritis, diabetes or clotting disorders.

I'd had three of these "hidden risks":

- I'd taken estrogen in the form of birth control pills for over 20 years.
- I'd suffered mild migraines for almost as long.
- And, after my stroke, doctors found my most serious risk: an autoimmune disease that causes my blood to clot too easily. A disease I never knew I had.

But I might have known, if I'd known what to look for.

A month after my stroke, doctors told me I'd had subtle signals of a clotting disorder since my 20s:

I'd had two false positives on the test for syphilis required for a marriage license. I'd had pregnancy problems: a miscarriage and a tubal pregnancy. And, my knees often looked purplish and mottled especially when I got chilled.

Based on medical knowledge of the time — the '70s and '80s — my doctors didn't think anything of it. Nor did I. I just didn't like to wear shorts! But the false positives, the miscarriage, the mottled purple knees all were signs of a clotting disorder.

Even later, I might have dodged the stroke... if I'd known what to look for.

In the year before my stroke, the forgetfulness, the increasing pace of migraines, the "rhyming" mistakes in my writing — all were signs that my brain might not be getting enough oxygen.

If I'd reported these to my doctor... If my doctor had connected the dots, he might have ordered simple blood tests that would have identified the clotting disorder that was the primary culprit in my stroke. It's an unpronounceable disease called Antiphospholipid Syndrome or APS. My doctor would have advised me not to take estrogen. He might also have prescribed low-dose aspirin to reduce my risk of stroke.

I was lucky. The morning after my stroke I couldn't recite the alphabet or spell my own name. I couldn't hold a fork, button a blouse, tie a shoe.

In the two years since then, I've recovered much of what I lost. I worked furiously at speech therapy and hand therapy, and I was lucky that so many brain cells were able to heal.

My recovery isn't perfect. On bad days I forget how to spell "lousy." I put face cream on my toothbrush, stick orange juice in the microwave. It's taken me three months to write this story.

But I'm working again, part-time, to raise women's awareness of the dangers of stroke. I'm traveling. Since my stroke I've visited England, China and Africa. Most importantly, I'm writing to share my story with other women so they can learn from my experience. **SC**

KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS OF STROKE:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause

Call 9-1-1 IMMEDIATELY
if you experience symptoms!

Time lost is brain lost!

WHAT WOMEN NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE HIDDEN RISK FACTORS FOR STROKE

This year, more than 100,000 U.S. women under 65 will have a stroke.

Stroke is not a geriatric disease. And it's not confined to elderly overweight smokers who have high blood pressure or high cholesterol.

"Those are the most common risk factors," according to Steven J. Kittner, M.D., director of the Maryland Stroke Center at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in Baltimore. "But strokes can affect anyone at any age. There are other risk factors for stroke that are especially important for women under 55." These include:

- **Migraines:** Recent research shows that women who suffer from migraines with aura (visual disturbances such as flashing dots or blind spots) can be up to 10 times more likely to suffer a stroke, depending on other risk factors.
- **Birth Control Pills:** Women who take even a low-estrogen birth control pill may be twice as likely to have a stroke than those who don't and the risk may increase if other risk factors are present.
- **Hormone Replacement Therapy:** Women who take hormone replacement therapy may have a slightly increased stroke risk.
- **Autoimmune diseases** such as diabetes or lupus can increase the risk of stroke.
- **Clotting disorders:** Women who've had more than one miscarriage may be at higher risk for blood clots, which can increase their chance of a stroke. Other signs of a possible clotting disorder can include previous history of clots in the legs (deep vein thrombosis); and livedo reticularis, a mottled purplish discoloration of the skin.

"Risk factors are cumulative," Dr. Kittner adds. "Reducing even one risk can greatly lower your chances of having a stroke."