

My Fight with PD

Prof David Blacker: A Neurologist with Parkinson's Disease

In late 2018, Prof David Blacker revealed to family, friends and colleagues that he had Parkinson's Disease (PD) – a diagnosis that altered the direction of his life and career.

As Prof Blacker explains:

"It has led me down a path I had never expected to pursue, but in many ways I was well prepared for. Curiously, my own experience with PD may have made my life more meaningful and fulfilling. As a neurologist and medical researcher who has PD, I have a unique opportunity to incorporate what I've experienced as a person with PD into research and treatment for others.





"This book describes my life story, and the impact PD has had on me. Where possible, I try to provide some information about PD, as well as my perceptions and feelings. I hope this might benefit others with PD and their families.

"The acronym FIGHT stands for Feasibility of Instituting Graduated High-intensity Training. This was a clinical feasibility trial of exercise using non-contact boxing that I developed with former boxing champion Rai Fazio and some prominent sports scientists.

"The experience of designing, undertaking and having the trial published has been one of the highlights of my career. It occurred while I was coming to terms with retiring early from clinical practice due to PD and a series of other health issues.

"The power of exercise, positive attitude and the amazing support from my wife have helped me continue to live well, and convinced me that these interventions, when applied promptly and expertly, can alter the course of PD. It has also given me a second career advocating and fighting for the benefit of people with PD."

What readers will find inside

-  **Section 1: Before the fight** – Describes Prof Blacker's personal and professional background and his PD diagnosis, early years of treatment, and the impact on his life.
-  **Section 2: FIGHTing PD** – how he tackled his own PD and the creation of the FIGHT-PD exercise program.
-  **Section 3: The FIGHT is not over** – his ongoing efforts to keep PD at bay from 2022 to 2024, in the face of a series of other illnesses. Outlines three projects commenced in 2024 which had immediate impact for people with PD.
-  **Conclusion** – his thoughts on how the course of PD might be favourably altered.

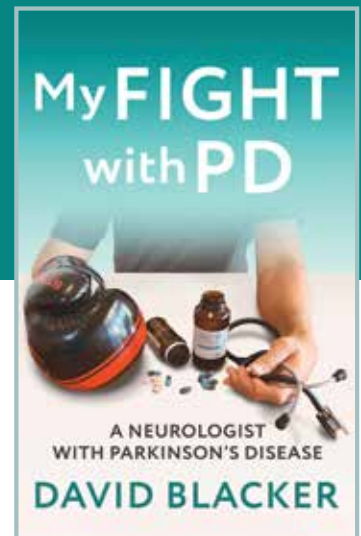


KEY MOMENTS

- AMA (WA) member Professor David Blacker AM has dedicated four decades to medicine, neurology, and pioneering advances in stroke care.
- Following his Parkinson's diagnosis in 2018, he redirected his career towards research, advocacy, and developing exercise-based therapies that are now improving lives across the Parkinson's community.
- His collaboration with former boxing champion Rai Fazio led to the groundbreaking FIGHT-PD program.
- In 2023, David was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for his service to medicine and neurological research.

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*My Fight with PD.***

Prof Blacker will donate \$5 to Parkinson's WA for every paperback bought from the Parkinson's WA online store.



Edited book extract

Symptoms at work

My previously energetic bounding gait, which would include zooming up several flights of stairs as the team trailed behind, was becoming an ungainly trudge across the hospital. When colleagues commented, I'd brush it off, saying I was a bit sore from running too much.

I developed a habit of holding my small exam bag (proudly brought back from the Mayo Clinic – a symbol amongst neurologists of doing time there) in the crook of my bent and slow-moving right elbow. My handwriting was becoming a laborious scrawl. Initially, I minimised the issue by laughing it off as 'typical doctor's handwriting' and by making a conscious effort to be more concise. I'd try to complete as many forms as I could before the patients came into my office. Looking back through my outpatient notes, I could clearly see the deterioration. At times, I started using my left hand to move the right hand with the pen. What became more disturbing was my observation that many of my PD patients were moving more freely than I was.

Reaction to the diagnosis

The weeks following the formal diagnosis and commencement of medication were difficult. Even though I knew it was coming, to hear it being confirmed still had a powerful effect. On the positive side, it confirmed I was not imagining the symptoms, and it wasn't something more sinister. There was also some validation of my own diagnosis.

What I found particularly difficult was a shift in my thinking about the future. My previous mental picture was of looking forward to a very active retirement, perhaps still doing some private work and research, but also enjoying a lot of travel with Kirsten. I'd also hoped to finally have some time to put in extra practice into my golf game, and even get good enough to play in some amateur tournaments and senior pennants.

I suddenly felt all of this wasn't going to happen; and that I'd inevitably get functionally worse because that's what is supposed to happen in PD. This feeling of the future I'd planned being taken away was probably the worst part of the early post-diagnosis time.

Prostate cancer

I felt a great sense of frustration and exhaustion, as yet another health struggle now loomed. I'd had COVID-19 in May 2022, two cataract surgeries in August 2022, a depressive episode in September/October 2022, and deterioration of PD symptoms. By early 2023, when it felt like I was starting to get back on top of things, a retinal detachment knocked me down again. And now CANCER!! I wondered if I had the energy left to go through another medical battle.

Taking stock and seeing the silver lining

For the first time in two years, I could assess where my PD was at without other conditions obscuring the picture. Pre-diagnosis, my life was dominated by work.

Without PD, perhaps I would have retired early anyway. Perhaps I would have continued working too hard and had a stroke. Worse still, I could have continued in a sleep-deprived, caffeine-dependent state, and made mistakes that harmed a patient. I'm glad I recognised this and retired from acute stroke work when I did. In retrospect, the stress I put myself under in 2019 may well have worsened my PD. It wasn't until this contemplative time in 2024 that I fully appreciated that.

People unfamiliar with PD, and many people with PD, may find it strange that I believe my life to be better for having PD. At this stage, I feel I've been granted several surprising gifts: being forced to slow down and be more appreciative of everything; understanding the value of mindfulness which has strengthened my already fantastic relationship with my wife who has been amazing with the 'in sickness' part of the marriage vows. I've done things (like boxing training) and met people (like Rai) I never would have otherwise.

Despite physical limitations, I find myself to be mentally freer than ever before. As a neurologist, it has given me an incredible opportunity to assist people with PD and to help my colleagues understand the experience of living with PD. Also, I'm grasping the chance to undertake several projects that will keep me engaged in the field for as long as I like. ■