

Podcast

A care plan for Brian, a brain in a dish

Science at its most inventive, most incredible—growing tiny brain organoids in a dish from human stem cells—sets off alarm bells in the bioethics corner. Progress is welcomed, yet it can be feared or mired in controversy. With experiments, a balancing act is required to counter the limitless potential of studying diseases that cannot be replicated in mouse models against the risks of the unknown—of creating consciousness, a sentient being. But, if we don't cross boundaries, what holy grail could be left unfound? How far should we go? How can we keep progress safe? How can we keep those who push for progress accountable?

A drama in a three-part podcast, *Silva Lining's Care Plan*, explores these questions, entering a space where the volatility of humans and their relationships raise difficult and pertinent questions. Is our brain the essence of self? What is a brain without a body, or a body without a brain? How does it feel when a loved one no longer remembers you and the relationship you once had? What does it mean to care for someone? What does it mean when a loved one is no longer the same person you cared for? Is a care plan even worth the paper it is written on?

Silva Lining's Care Plan is written and directed by arts-in-health specialist Elspeth Penny. Starting out as a theatrical work-in-progress piece, Penny describes the podcast drama as being "somewhere between Kafka and Ken Loach", becoming more Kafkaesque as it developed into an episodic podcast, recorded remotely by four actors, each in separate locations. The writing process was highly collaborative, based on research led by Justine Schneider (University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK) and the experience of science writer Philip Ball, who described how signaling neurons were grown from his own reprogrammed skin cells by a research team led by Selina Wray (UCL Queen Square Institute of Neurology, London, UK). Ball studied molecular mechanisms of Alzheimer's disease and frontotemporal dementia, generating neurons from stem cells to create "dementia in a dish". So, can laboratory "brains" become conscious? The protagonist in *Silva Lining's Care Plan* has affirmative evidence—she is growing a Brain and she keeps it under the stairs.

The podcast drama centres on Silva Lining (Marlene Sidaway), a retired surgeon with dementia who is looking for a "carer who cares", and Karen (Melissa Johns) from the We Care Agency, who arrives with a fresh positive attitude and a song—an ode to her mother ("Look at me Mum")—as she dreams of winning Carer of the Year. The carer job barely pays her bills, but Karen is proud of the work she does and wants to be the best she can be. Lurking in the background is Silva's son Mark (Cyril Nri), who appears

more interested in flirting with Karen's colleague Lisa than spending time with his mother. To the listener, it is unclear how Mark really feels about his mother's illness. He has set up a camera, but is it to spy on Karen the carer or simply to put his mind at ease by having a window into his mum's daily life, her care plan?

This tale is indeed strange. Punctuated by Silva's laboratory reports about her secret science experiment under the stairs, the story unfolds. The structure of the lab reports is adapted to navigate Silva's everyday living. Subheadings such as Method, Risk Assessment, Investigation, and Results are used to maintain control of her own self as her condition worsens. Silva's report—a different kind of care plan—includes the details of her experiment and what to do with Brain after she has gone, but it also allows her to compartmentalise what is occurring to her and record it in a way that is familiar.

Brain (Shappi Khorsandi), the experiment under the stairs, starts to become something (or even someone), emerging with unintelligible sounds, progressing to imitation and repetition, and eventually having a mind of its own. Short musical transitions set the mood; cellist Sarah Moody's double-stop technique (playing two notes simultaneously) creates more dissonance than harmony, but this intensity is also softened as the intimacy of a friendship develops between the older woman, Silva, and her young carer, Karen. Silva decides that Karen is "the one" to entrust with her "blobs in a dish" (as Karen calls the experiment), before renaming Brain as Brian. The organoid grows more lucid, more intelligent, acerbic, and even rude, as Silva's cognitive functions decline. "I'm not a person anymore", Silva says, feeling ignored and unheard. Dementia begins to change the dynamic, as happens in life, and the listener senses betrayal.

The podcast drama is largely inspired by a UK National Institute for Health Research School for Social Care Research study called BOUGH (Broadening Our Understanding of Good Home care). The study is designed to understand the scope of good quality home care for people with dementia. During the study, carers kept diaries, which allowed verbatim dialogue to be anonymously dramatised into an audience-engaged work. Overall, the story is hard to follow at times, with some of the narrative superfluous and even a little silly, but the strength of the podcast lies in highlighting an array of important and relevant conversations for today. As Penny says: "we really want to get people talking".

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<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/dementia/projects/ough/index.aspx>