

Gwendoline, of Middlesbrough, documents her AF journey – from misdiagnosis to diagnosis

In November 2006, I suddenly found it harder to breathe. After a few days I decided to dial 999 for help. A paramedic arrived and performed an ECG, at the time I hadn't a clue what he was sticking on me. After a few minutes he said my heart seemed okay, but just to make sure he took me to the A&E dept. The junior doctor on shift listened to my lungs and diagnosed my symptoms as a panic attack! He asked the nurse to bring me a cup of tea and a biscuit and then discharged me with a note to my GP.



Gwendoline with her dog Jack

I took the note to my GP the very next day and, after reading the note, she gave me a prescription for citalopram. I innocently took one that day and after two hours I saw zigzags and went dizzy! The next day I took a 2nd tablet thinking I may be just adjusting to this new drug but the same thing - I saw zigzag zebra lines and nearly passed out! I rang the surgery and another GP at the surgery said; "stop taking them at once!" Thirty minutes later a car came for me to see an ophthalmic surgeon, he examined my eyes and again I was told to stop taking the tablets. Thank goodness no damage had been done to my eyes. So I went home, still finding it harder and harder to breathe! I rang NHS direct who told me to breathe into a brown paper bag - supposedly to relax me. Well, if you knew me, no one has more zest for life than me and to be "diagnosed" with any sort of psychosomatic illness is totally alien to me. I've never had any psychological illness in my life; on the contrary, I'm quite an extrovert!

So I carried on for another 14 days and went back to my GP, who took my blood pressure which was, naturally, a bit up. The GP prescribed 2.5mg of ramipril, the starting dose for blood pressure. I carried on for another two days until New Year's Eve and at that point, I had to call an emergency doctor. They sent a car for me at 1 am and the driver rang the all-night surgery stating: "She's too ill to get into a car- you must send a specialist." So, at 2 am a physician arrived and listened to my lungs and said: "Don't say one word; you'll be in hospital in two minutes flat. You're lungs are full of fluid and you have no oxygen at all, you may have an embolism which could kill you if it reaches your brain - this is dire."

Soon after, I was off in a blue-light ambulance for the first time in my life. Within five minutes I arrived at the hospital and was taken to the assessment ward. A registrar physician came to drain my lungs which enabled me to breathe again - I sat up feeling marvellous! The registrar sent me to the thoracic ward to sit within an oxygen tent and this is where I stayed for the next three days with mask on my face.

During my stay on the thoracic ward, a cardiologist visited to reveal I was suffering from atrial fibrillation and, as a result, I would be moved to the cardiac ward so they could better monitor me. Thereafter, they started me on warfarin and told me they would try a cardioversion in three months time. Unfortunately, the cardioversion only returned my

heart to sinus rhythm for five days, and subsequently it reverted back. They tried once more but the same thing happened again.

At the moment I'm happy to say the combination of warfarin and digoxin is working for me. After all, it could have been very different.

Very best wishes,

Gwendoline Lamb