

Martin, 51, speaks of his struggle with atrial fibrillation

Thinking back, my problems with AF became more apparent in the summer of 2011, with more pronounced palpitations. It's fair to say that I have suffered with palpitations and minor chest pain for years, which were probably work stress related. I am self-employed and mostly support a 4-adult family household.

In September 2011 I went on a short walking holiday in Sussex and noticed basic hill climbing was becoming a struggle. I was giving up cigarettes at the time and don't drink too much these days either, so I figured this was likely to have been the problem.

A month or so later I went to a go-karting event, which really knocked me up and I suffered for weeks afterwards with breathing problems and intercostal muscle damage. Over Christmas and New Year 2012, I decided enough was enough and went and saw my local GP. One week later I'd had two ECG's, and was immediately placed on aspirin and 3.5mg. of bisoprolol. I'd had regular blood tests done for cholesterol (3.7 ok) anyway and all other groupings including liver, potassium and puffer test were fine.

My GP is aware that my family history has pre-disposition for congenital heart disease and my blood pressure has always been on the high side. In fact, I was on atenolol for ages, but came off that a few years back. My pulse is quite erratic with long gaps and passing out was a possibility, so we monitored the beta-blockers, as this could worsen the situation. I wasn't happy with bisoprolol as it made me feel worse.

In February, I visited a cardiologist who confirmed the permanent AF diagnosis and put me on 5mg. of warfarin daily, with weekly blood tests until a date for cardioversion could be arranged. He also changed the bisoprolol for ramipril and did an echocardiogram scan of my heart. He also suggested I have a nuclear medicine isotope and scan booked for April. My GP says I am down 20% oxygen deficiency, so I frequently become breathless, but then I have good days and I have bad days. I sometimes have a 'leadon' left arm and tingling in my hands. I don't have major chest pain, just an uncomfortable indigestion type feeling most of the time. My appetite is ok. I also take 'vitamin D3' and 500mg. of 'cod liver oil' and 'paracetamol' for headaches daily, but I feel the cold terribly, so I rarely take off my coat, gloves or socks. I am unsure whether to continue taking amitriptylene, which I occasionally used as an aid to sleep and headaches, nor have I had much 'food' guidance, except for that learnt from AFA forum members and the internet regarding vitamin k.

My sleep pattern is often disturbed and I am yet to understand the prognosis for my future, or long-term damage to my heart that may have occurred as any pre-cursor to possible congenital heart disease. My daily BP varies between 140/105 and 120/80 and my pulse between 50-80 beats per/min. One point of interest which my GP didn't seem concerned about, but which bothers me, is for the last 18 months I had kept at least x2 mobile phones in my jacket breast pocket adjacent to my heart. I wondered if there was a connection between microwave energy and my heart's apparent electrical disruption?

Anyway the upshot of all this is, within 6 months I have gone from a fit, do everything active 50 year old man, to someone who sometimes has trouble starting the lawnmower or walking the mile or so to the shops. I am officially classed as 'vulnerable' and last winter got a flu jab for the first time in my life. I also suffer from SAD and need regular light therapy.

Weekly blood tests are very painful and cause great anxiety and I have to wait for a call from the warfarin clinic for the INR result, or alternatively I call them if I haven't heard for a couple of days. There are no AF nurses, which do visits in this area. I did suggest that our GP practice list other AF sufferers and we could perhaps have regular meetings and a base to talk about things, but that's unlikely to happen either.

In an effort to keep the INR stable, I've practically given up tea, chocolate, coffee, all foods containing vitamin k and other stimulants. My libido and interest in most things is lessened by effort and I have been more socially reclusive, moodier with a shorter attention span and conversation. I am also clumsier and often stagger against walls in corridors and get regular nosebleeds.

The nuclear medicine episode in April was truly awful experience and I can only liken it to an executioner's chair, as drugs are pressure injected by machine into both arms jammed with double cannulas in three minute periods over a 6 minute test. I suppose it's a stress test, but it was a very unpleasant event, that took days for me to recover from. I had no feedback from the hospital on the test, or scan results, except that gleaned from my GP, which seemed to suggest all was ok.

Nevertheless I must continue with the ignomnimity of weekly blood tests well into the summer, which vary between 2-3 (in-range) and lots of pills in a dosette box, which I invariably forget to take (I set myself an alarm on my phone as a reminder). I have cardioversion in June, which bizarrely is on the same day my father died of a heart attack 11 years ago.

I really do try and stay positive, but I have no-one to talk to who can possibly understand the problems and emotionally turmoil I suffer daily. I cannot expect my family to understand nor expect them to do anything to effect a lifestyle change for my benefit. So under the current economic climate we're all in these days, I have no choice than to carry on working 12+ hours a day everyday to support the household and pay the bills.

I know inevitably, I will have to take responsibility to improve the quality of my life for myself without expecting others to do that for me and I know I have to 'manage' AF, but I don't know how. After a little breakdown recently I cried in anguish at my predicament, so I filled in a PHQ-9 form, which told my GP that I am depressed.

Whether the cardioversion works or not, I will continue to have small cigars and an occasional glass of red wine to celebrate my life.