

Ian's Story

I was 70-years-old when I was diagnosed with AF after having two mini strokes in one day. I was prescribed warfarin, which I am still taking aged 82. AF does not stop me having an active life; designing and making in my workshop and playing competitive tennis twice a week.

Childhood

I was a games enthusiast from a young age. When I was 17, I played football for the school on Saturday mornings and I played for a youth team on Saturday afternoons. On Saturday nights I played table tennis. In the evenings I would stand at the bus stop to go home and very often faint. A regular traveller on my bus and neighbour, used to pick me up and guide me on to the bus, always wondering if I had been drinking!

I have always been quite good at ball games and gymnastics, but I have been unable to run 100 yards competitively without feeling absolutely dreadful. After national service, I qualified as a PE and games teacher, was awarded colours for field events in the athletics team, but avoided running. After college, I qualified as an ASA teacher of swimming and a RLSS Instructor – but avoided distance swimming when I could, because of the dread of exhaustion. I could never understand why I seemed to be without stamina, when physically I was in good shape.

As a PE teacher, I coached football after school several nights a week and I coached competitive gymnastics every lunch time. At the end of term I was usually shattered and sometimes had a day or two in bed to recover. I once went to my doctor at the end of term who referred me to a heart specialist. After the examination I was asked what major surgery I had recently had. I had not had any surgery. This would be about 1953-4. I do not know if AF was commonly diagnosed then from electrocardiograms (ECGs), but the surgeon seemed to suspect something was left undiagnosed. In hindsight, I think I have had AF for a long time. I gave up PE teaching aged 26 years because of a knee problem and went back to college for a new career.

Diagnosis

One day when I was 70-years of age, I experienced a transient ischaemic attack (TIA). I saw bright lights around my head which were like 'fireworks'. I saw my doctor within an hour and he thought I had had a migraine.

I had a second similar TIA that evening when I was alone at home. At this time I was recovering from an un-displaced ankle fracture from a tennis injury. When I was experiencing the TIAs, I thought that the deep vein thrombosis which was suspected in my calf was breaking up. That night I called the NHS Helpline and spoke to both a nurse and then a doctor, who advised that I urgently visit the nearest stroke clinic in Northumberland. The helpline was very helpful. An appointment was arranged for the following day.

The ECG confirmed an abnormal heart rhythm and I was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation (AF). My doctor, who is a tennis playing friend, arranged a subsequent ECG in his surgery, because he was sceptical about the diagnosis. His ECG gave me the all clear! A short time later he invited me for another ECG after purchasing new equipment in his surgery, and the AF was picked up.

Treatment

I have not had any treatment, only preventative medication. I was prescribed warfarin, (which I still take, without fail!). Subsequently, within a week or two I had a heart scan and neck scan to investigate for clots and thankfully I was clear. The fact that I have had no treatment shocked a surgeon, who was to do a small (outpatient) hand operation. He required me to see a heart

specialist before he would proceed. The heart specialist thought that as the warfarin had worked for ten years, he could not see any value in suggesting new treatment. The only (slight) problem I have had with warfarin is a post-op bleed after a hernia operation when I was about 78. I looked severely bruised but it cleared in a couple of weeks.

Still active

I am never aware of palpitations before or after playing tennis or brisk daily dog walking. I enjoy playing competitive tennis twice a week, once indoors with fellow ex-county veteran tennis players and local players, who are up to thirty years younger. Two of them are my doctors, so I think this is a wise move! I am never completely shattered or aware of AF.

Living with AF

The only discomfort I have ever felt is what I call 'heart racing' in my sleep. There is no pain, but I wake up thinking that the heart racing has been caused by dreaming. At first this alarmed me a bit, but it is now just something that happens from time to time. This is the only symptom I have and it is not intrusive to my life.

Coincidentally, before the TIAs, I had purchased a commercial battery driven device, which has three settings: 1. calming, 2. pain relief for soft tissue soreness and 3.

stimulation. I had used it for post tennis soreness and to encourage sleep. One night, years ago, when I was awakened having palpitations I placed the device on my chest and the palpitations stopped after a few seconds. I still use the device to encourage sleep and to calm my heart racing, but I do not know how it works. I have told the manufacturers and they say it is 'hearsay' without scientific evidence.

After reading of the very considerable difficulties other AF patients have, I realise how incredibly fortunate I am in being able to virtually ignore it - so long as I take warfarin. I am forever grateful to the NHS for their instant responses in my times of need.

Ian Anderson