

## Diagnosed with AF – four (full) marathons later, and counting!



*Stuart realised something wasn't quite right when he checked his pulse and found his heart racing. When he eventually was diagnosed with AF, he didn't let it demotivate him from his passion for running!*

The AF diagnosis four years ago (2009) at the age of 63, came as a total shock. I still remember the first moment very well; sitting and watching the early evening news on the television, I was suddenly aware of a strange feeling in the my chest. My heart beat was irregular, a few quick beats followed by some normal ones and then irregular again. This could not be right; *this is just something temporary* I told myself. I spent the next month going around holding my left wrist with my right hand fingers. Sometimes the pulse was irregular, sometimes it was normal.

When it was obvious that it wasn't going to go away, I went to see my GP who carried out an ECG and diagnosed AF. I found it difficult to accept that I had anything wrong with my heart. I was very fit and active, always a sportsman, of normal weight, good diet, a non-smoker and drinking alcohol in moderation. I had low blood pressure and a low heart rate. I was doing everything right, so why me! And my parents lived to ripe old ages! There must be a lot we do not know about AF. I was in shock for a while – would this shorten my life? Would it mean changing my lifestyle to something less active and, most importantly, would I still be able to care for my wife at home? She has Alzheimer 's disease and I was, and still am, her principal carer. She lives at home and requires 24-hour one-to-one care. I needed to stay fit and well to look after her.

# **I was afraid that the AF would put an end to my hopes but my consultant said that he knew other AF sufferers that had run a marathon**

My GP sent me to a consultant who did a scan, monitored my heart whilst on a treadmill and fitted me with a heart monitor for a couple of days. The diagnosis was confirmed as being AF for which I was given medication – flecainide acetate and verapamil hydrochloride.

About the time of the diagnosis I had started training for the London marathon, my first one. I was afraid that the AF would put an end to my hopes but my consultant said that I could go ahead, he knew other AF sufferers that had run a marathon. I ran the London marathon in 4 hours

53 minutes. Running a marathon is not just about the event itself, it is more about the miles and miles of training runs. I had no AF problems although during months of training and on the day I did not even think about it; such is the euphoria of the London marathon.

Before the marathon I thought, like many first timers, that it would be my only one. After the event I realised that I had enjoyed the whole experience and thought that I would quite like to do another. And that started a love affair with distance running. Since then I have done three more (full marathons, all 26.2 miles of them), including an off road marathon, and my time is down to 4 hours 17 minutes. I now aim to do two marathons a year, I have sub 4 hours as a goal which would make me “good for my age”. My next marathon is New York in November (2013). My pulse is now low and regular, my blood pressure remains low and I no longer go about holding my left wrist. I continue to care for my wife at home. I run for the sheer pleasure of it, it keeps me fit and provides the break I need from being a carer. I can fit in running to suit the hours of the professional carers that help me look after my wife during the week.

The AF is, of course, still with me. It always will be but the medication has it totally under control. I have not had any palpitations for a very long time. Taking the medication has become a matter of routine and is the only reminder that I have the condition. Through it all I have been determined to live life as though without AF. That remains the case, my priority being fit and healthy enough to care for my wife at home. Running helps me enormously with this, it keeps my heart healthy. Long may that continue!

**Stuart Colwill, Berkshire (2013)**