

Sylvia's story

Sylvia experienced a TIA in May 2015. Thankfully there were few long lasting effects.

My first episode of PAF occurred in 2004. This was triggered by a chemotherapy drug that I was having administered intravenously: adriamycin (Doxorubicin). It did not occur again until 2007, and then only infrequently. However in 2011 these episodes were happening more often. I finally realized that one of my triggers were



caused by wearing a fitted top, or if I'd slept on my left side. I discovered that one of my migraine pills (Zolmitriptan) were also sometimes responsible for these events.

I had read that as you get older that PAF can become more frequent. Until then I had never had an episode any longer than two hours, but then one lasted for twelve hours. I had not been prescribed any medication. I was under 65 and had a CHADSVASc score of 1.

I am a vegetarian, with normal BP and a healthy diet and lifestyle. I did not think I could be at risk for stroke. Unfortunately, on May 9, 2015, I did have a stroke, a TIA; the clots went straight from my heart into my mid cerebral artery.

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The episode had started the night before, for no apparent reason at all. I had just had a shower and climbed into bed, and then I felt immediate flutters in my chest. I fell asleep, and the next morning I was still in AF. I had no other symptoms, so I attended an eye clinic appointment, and then I went to vote in the General Election. I did feel more tired than usual, although the AF had abated by then.

That evening I went to bed and arose at 3am to use the bathroom, still feeling OK. For some reason, I woke again at 6am. I could not speak clearly. It sounded like gobbledygook, but I did not realize my husband could not understand what I was saying. I got up to use the bathroom and then I noticed that I felt dizzy and my left arm was a bit floppy.

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I heard my husband calling an ambulance. He later told me that I also had a droopy mouth and that he had realized that I was displaying stroke symptoms. The paramedics were here very quickly; they were absolutely wonderful, and whisked me at speed to the hospital. I did not have a headache or feel ill, but I was glad to be going to hospital so speedily.

After a short time, I was taken for a CT scan and then given some aspirin. At the Stoke Ward, I then realised that I could not see the time on my watch; my vision was blurred. The following morning I also realised that my peripheral vision was also affected as in the bathroom I could not figure out where the toilet bowl was situated. I was not allowed any food or fluids for 48 hours, as there was not a swallowing specialist available (Saturday and Sunday). I also noticed that my handwriting was indecipherable. It remained like this for many days. Two and a half days later I was discharged on an anticoagulant (I had expressed a preference for dabigatran), to prevent further strokes.

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The lay-out of my home felt strange at first. I had some sensory problems; I could not use my phone, as I was simply not pressing hard enough on the keys. I could not remember how to use the phone either, but it only took a few minutes to relearn these skills. Visually, I could not discern when I had a new message to read and I could not differentiate from a bold font.

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No-one in the Stroke Ward told me what symptoms to expect. I felt especially sorry for the elderly patients. At home, I kept misplacing items; also I could not remember how to use the microwave either. It usually only took a few minutes to relearn these tasks.

The following morning I returned for a carotid artery ultrasound. Thankfully it did not show any obstructions. My legs felt heavy for several weeks, and I when I was talking my voice sounded

different. I saw a cardiologist - an Electrophysiologist, and he prescribed heart rhythm and heart rate medications: flecainide and bisoprolol. I have not had any side effects from any of these drugs.

My speech was a bit slurred for a few weeks. I did not find speech therapy too helpful, she told me that my speech was fine, when everyone else, including me and the doctor could hear that it was slurred. My speech improved after a few weeks. For my slight left droop, I found a website online which provides exercises to retrain the facial muscles. Basically I learned how to smile in a different way. Many people comment that they would not think from looking at me that I'd experienced a stroke.

I waited months before I wanted to drive again. I was nervous about the possibility of accidentally banging my head. I suppose I was focused on the clots on my brain but it is important to ask your specialist any questions that are concerning you. My specialist explained to me that the clots learn to compensate, and after a few months they become scar tissue.

Also make sure that the specialists know about all of the medications that you are taking, to avoid taking a pill that may interact with them. I mentioned that I was taking Zolmitriptan and I was then advised that I can only take paracetamol now. I also contacted the Migraine Association who were speedy and detailed in their responses to my email

questions, which included several pdf links. They advised me on dosage; that it is far more effective to take 100mg immediately, rather than 500mg to start with. It works!

I make a point of walking even more than I did before. I also plan to volunteer for the Stroke Association. The AF Association online forum:

www.healthunlocked.com/afassociation is

incredibly helpful and I feel that I have made lots of new friends!

I feel absolutely fine, and now it all just seems a distant memory. I hope that my story can be helpful to someone else who has experienced a stroke.

Sylvia, Staffordshire (2015)

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