

David's story

Atrial Fibrillation and Me

What a busy Christmas Day that was! It was 2007 and we had 12 in for the meal with me chief cook but not bottle washer. It was an exhausting day and one where I drank far too much. At a guess, I put back 4 bottles of beer and 2 bottles of red wine – I got to bed and expected a hangover on Boxing Day!

At about 4am I awoke with a start and wondered what the hell was going on. My heart was trying to jump out of my rib cage. We've all had occasional palpitations but this was something special. I said nothing and lay there till breakfast time. Now, Boxing Day is not a good time to get an appointment at the Health Centre, I therefore put up with it and then, the following day, even drove a 90 miles round trip to drop by daughter's partner off at the airport for him to fly to see his mum in the south. I did ask my wife to make me an appointment with the doctor that afternoon.

Back home, I went to the Health Centre and a quick check of the pulse resulted in a quick referral next door for an ECG. I remember the nurse saying "Blimey, it's all over the place!", then apologised for speaking out of turn. The doctor looked at the graph and described what was going on. I told him that I was due to fly off to New Zealand in 6 days. He told me that should still be ok, providing that I did not react badly to the pills he was prescribing. This reassured me that I wasn't at death's door but, after speaking to my travel insurer, I cancelled as they would not cover me for a heart condition. They, therefore, paid me back my costs – significant! I did feel, though, that 24 hours, twice, on a plane and driving a motor caravan for 18 days would be quite strenuous

The doctor told me that the condition can be brought on by many things, known and unknown, including excessive alcohol. I grasped at this and decided to severely reduce my drinking! He also said that it could right itself at any moment. On the 13th day of AF, it ticked back into position, I had a confirmation ECG and, while walking home across a supermarket car park, just generally feeling quite pleased but not emotional, I just burst into tears with relief, which is not something I make a habit of.

For 4 months, I had no problems apart from being a bit more tired than normal. I put that down to beta blockers slowing my pulse to 45, a big drop from typically 130 during AF and 62 normally. We went to Denmark for a few days and on the last day, I had a long drive, then the airport, then the flight and realised, back home, that the AF had returned. Maybe travel stress could bring it on – who knows? At least, this time, I knew what it was and I slept well that night. I went through the ECG routine again, then 5 days later, flew off to Norway for a cruise up the coast, using the money not spent on New Zealand. A word of warning! Three weeks in New Zealand can be cheaper than 2 and a half in Norway!

I decided that I would find the cruise relaxing so I shouldn't concern myself too much with the AF. Amazingly, after a long day travelling, the AF disappeared that evening in Bergen! So, a stressful day travelling can get rid of it as well as bringing it on! Also, as alcohol had not played a part in the episode, I thought of all the boozy nights out I'd missed!

Life went on unchanged and, apart from being more tired than I was before, all was well. Then, in December last year, I was clearing snow off the car one morning and sensed, rather than felt, my heart go out of rhythm. Off to the doctors for yet another ECG and, yes, it was back. It was, though, less violent than previously and the doctor said this was because of the drugs I was on. I've been in AF since and am presently waiting for cardioversion.

Obviously, I hope the cardioversion works but, since those first few Christmas days, I've hardly lost any sleep worrying about it. This has surprised me but you are what you are, I suppose. I've not put a brave face on it – it's just that it's of no great consequence to me. Ironically, if my ears become blocked with wax, I panic and cannot sleep until I've been syringed. I've even phoned NHS Direct at 11 at night asking

for an emergency syringe (and didn't get one!), so there's neither rhyme nor reason to my reaction to health issues.

I also don't think "Why has it happened to me?" Why shouldn't it? It happens to millions and I'm just one of a large number.

The worst part of it all is taking amiodorone. This removes the skin's natural protection to sunlight. I've therefore had to restrict my activities – I no longer garden, nor clean the windows outside!

One thing I've not mentioned is that I've had a few hospital visits. Firstly, the echo-cardiogram with the volume turned up is like the sound track to a horror movie. Also, the Cardiologist discovered leaking valves.....but that's another story!