

# **“AF is more than just palpitations”**

## **A Patient’s Perspective**

My Name is Sam, I am 50 years of age and I work in the computer industry. My work involves a considerable amount of travel, in a typical week I can easily drive around 800 miles visiting clients.

I first displayed the symptoms associated with AF in 2001, and for me the symptoms originally consisted of palpitations, general shortness of breath, and fatigue which was not improved by rest or sleep.

### **“The heart occupies a special place in our consciousness”**

I believe very strongly that my AF was directly related to work place stress, my post at the time had been deleted from the organisational structure and I had a formal offer of redundancy.

I was 43, had a young family and serious financial commitments. It was a very worrying time, in addition to the blow to one’s confidence and self esteem, I had worked in the public sector since leaving school at the age of 17, this was a very big change for me.

I had wrongly assumed that when I left and the stress levels dropped, not only would I start to sleep and eat normally again but the heart related symptoms would also stop. However AF had other ideas and my symptoms and problems today are a legacy from that time.

Paradoxically I am not the sort of person who likes to discuss my medical issues with friends, colleagues or even family. I have tried to keep my condition confidential; my parents, for

example, are unaware that I have been living with a heart problem for the last seven years. This in itself has placed a strain on my wife and children, but I am determined to maintain my privacy.

Because I believe I can pinpoint the cause of my AF problems, and because I could argue that it was if ‘not self inflicted’ at least avoidable, I am very resentful of having the condition. This has manifested itself (very rarely) in me losing my temper, usually with my closest family. Particularly at times of stress such as leading up to the ablation procedure.

For me, and I suspect many others, the heart occupies a special place in our consciousness and this is reflected in our everyday language. If we wish to emphasise the importance of something we very often say ‘it is at the heart of the issue’ etc. And so for me when I was diagnosed with a heart condition I immediately thought that it was very serious and the consequences dire. So far this has not proved to be the case.

I guess the point I am trying to make is that AF affects more than your physical state, it occupies your mind, and the non physical aspects of the condition are very important (to the patient). I believe anxiety and stress about the condition itself is a factor in treating the condition.

I believe I have asymptomatic Atrial Fibrillation which means I am largely unaware of the erratic and irregular heart rhythm most of the time. However, if left untreated I would from time to time suffer from shortness of breath, fatigue-particularly using stairs, and a general lack of energy.

I had an ablation procedure in

November 2006 but unfortunately it did not work. I am now on a combination of drugs including beta blockers; unfortunately I have started to suffer side effects from these drugs and we are looking again at other drugs and other options.

### **“I have had to build a drug regime into my life”**

During the seven years of having AF I have gone from someone who was loathe to take a headache tablet to someone who has become familiar with a wide range of drugs including warfarin. I have at some points had to adjust dosages in line with the results of monthly blood tests and mix and match various combinations of drugs. So I have had to build a drug regime into my life which is not always easy when travelling.

At the moment I feel AF is manageable but I also feel I am on a medical treadmill with tests, drugs, consultations etc and I think back to the days when life seemed less complicated.

Unlike some medical conditions there does not seem to be a definitive cure for AF, for me anyway, and I am resigned to learning to live with some low level symptoms and a drug regime. My priority is to be able to continue to earn a living and support my family, keep my privacy and not to let AF define me to the wider world.

The thing about AF is that it can be like living life in the slow lane, you have no spare energy or enthusiasm and consequently it can feel like a form of premature aging.....or maybe I am just getting old!