Adrian’s story

Adrian noticed that an exercise machine at the gym indicated a ‘false reading’. After seeing his GP, he was sent to A&E where he was quickly diagnosed with AF.

I first noticed I had a problem with my heart rate one Sunday in 2006. Of course I did nothing but have a quiet day and expected everything to return to normal. It did but a few days later at the gym the machines were giving a ‘false reading’ for my heart rate! When I tried the third machine just to be sure, I decided it was time to visit my doctor.

After an ECG I was told to go to A&E, but not to drive. A friend took me, the doctors at A&E were expecting me and I was sent straight through. I must admit I felt a bit of a fraud, as I didn't feel that bad. I was still in atrial flutter; I had another ECG, the jab to the stomach just in case it was a heart attack, and a chat to nice young doctor and nursing team. Fortunately it was nothing more than AF. They decided I could be treated with sotalol. The main impact on me was I couldn't believe my body wasn't working properly and it took about six to nine months for me to accept what was happening, although I fortunately took the medication as prescribed.

The medication worked well for me for a few years, although the initial dose of sotalol was too much for me. My heart rate was reduced so when I tried to exercise it was like the first day of preseason training. I was short of breath and quickly tired every time I tried to exercise even though my exercise regime was quite gentle. I would have the odd episode where my heart would go into a prolonged period of atrial flutter. I think this was the worst time for me as I was unsure what to do, calls to NHS Direct or following the flow charts all end up with the same advice, go to A&E, which is what I did. I was always greeted with the same response. “Why did you wait before coming in?”

Over the years my medication was gradually increased until my hospital doctor suggested an ablation. We discussed the procedure and risks involved. There was a need for me to take warfarin as an anticoagulant. The regular checks were a bit of a pain, and the dosage was
changed to get me to the right INR range, but that’s just me moaning about the little things in life!

For me it was no brainer to have an ablation. Just do it please was my considered response after all of five seconds! There was a pre-assessment at the hospital a few days before the actual procedure. On the day of the procedure it was an early start, I was given a few checks and then was off to the catheter lab.

I knew I would be awake during the procedure so I asked if there was a screen I could watch it on but it would not have been practical for me to see. I wasn't really awake as I had been given a sedative which meant I drifted in and out of consciousness. I didn't feel anything until they went to zap the faulty areas of the heart and then it was just like indigestion, but only for a few moments and I was quickly out of it again. Soon I was back on the ward with a cup of tea, sandwich, and I was soon dressing to go home.

Unfortunately the first ablation didn't prove to be a complete success and I was soon experiencing atrial flutter again. As I was to find out later, they had ‘missed’ an area which required a zap. So a few months later I was going through the same procedure again. Having had an ablation before, I did not have any fears of the unknown, so I had the same procedure but with what seemed a successful outcome this time. A few months later I was signed off from the hospital, but with the knowledge of if there were any similar problems I would be back with them.

This was not the end of my experience as I developed AF again. But this time it was fibrillation and not atrial flutter. I required larger doses of sotalol and had longer periods where I was in AF. It did cause times where I felt out of breath and once that happened it would take a while to recover. I would still go for walks but I was aware of my condition and didn't push myself. I found alcohol would trigger an episode of AF, so I made the decision to stop drinking alcohol, well for most of the time and to be honest any pleasure from drinking was quickly lost by the effects of the AF.
Again the doctors and I discussed the risks of an ablation, as they were going across the heart from right to left there was increased risk. The statistics quoted were acceptable to me, and I believed the benefits of having a successful ablation outcome far outweighed those risks. Hospital waiting times were increasing so the original three to four months originally estimated before I would have my third ablation stretched to seven or eight months.

My third ablation was slightly different; instead of burning this one would freeze. To me it was no different. The process was the same, a pre assessment, an early start at the hospital, and this time I walked down to the lab rather than being taken down on a trolley. On to the table, relax and off they go to do the job. I was mainly asleep, but I was conscious at times. I remember looking around to see the team dressed in their maroon, lead aprons, and I did feel the zaps. It seemed to me it felt like I was a cartoon character getting an electric shock, and I recovered just as quickly as those cartoon characters do!

Post procedure I was moved to the recovery area, then to the ward. I had more tea and sandwiches but my blood pressure was a bit low so when it was time to leave I received a ride in a wheelchair to the car which was probably the low part of the day!

I took it gently for the next two weeks and since then I have been back to normal. I have been back in the gym. I have got through preseason training now, playing golf and walking the whole course without problems. I have also been walking in the Lake District, where climbing up would still cause me to run out of breath. I'm just not fit, but I get my breath back quickly and can carry on easily! Life is good thank you and if it were necessary I would have no fears of having another ablation.

Adrian, (2015)