



Hello, my name is Clive; I am 51 years old, a non-smoker and a very occasional drinker and was diagnosed with Paroxysmal Atrial Fibrillation.

One day, I came home after a hard day's work and as usual, ran up the stairs, got a cold beer out of the fridge as it was summer and knocked it back. Within a few minutes "I was aware of my heart going like a train, beating very rapidly." If you've never experienced anything like this before it can be quite frightening, and I was frightened.

Several hours passed with no abatement and my wife and I became increasingly worried. We were trying to think of why this was happening and why it wouldn't seem to stop. I had been working with solvents that day and wondered whether that coupled with rushing up the stairs and drinking alcohol could have fuelled this attack. It settled down after around 12 hours and I seemed to be fine again.

"I was aware of my heart going like a train, beating very rapidly."

Looking back, I had been working behind a desk for the last 2 years on a contract where I had little time for exercise. Previous to these 2 years I had kept myself quite fit. I had started exercising again and at the time of my first attack, I believe now I had gone too excessively into exercise again by not building up my fitness gradually. Since researching on the internet etc, I have read that excessive exercise can be a trigger for AF as it can potentially stretch

the pulmonary veins which allow the conduction of rogue electrical pulses. I understand these veins are much more flexible when you are younger. I went to see my GP and was sent up to hospital.

"I woke one night and my heart felt as though it was jumping out of my chest."

They gave me an ECG, put me on a treadmill, I had an ultrasound and a chest X-ray, all tests were normal, we all presumed that this was going to be an isolated incident so I just put it to the back of my mind because you want to.

However, a few weeks later, just as I was waking, I was experiencing the sensation of what I can only describe as my heart acting like a piece of blancmange, quivering on a plate. Immediately after I woke up properly and my brain clicked into control, the quivering stopped suddenly and I was back to normal. This continued for several mornings and if my wife put her hand on my chest she could feel this happening.

I woke one night and my heart felt as though it was jumping out of my chest. I was very alarmed and my wife bundled me into the car and drove me in the middle of the night to the A&E. I was immediately plugged up to several monitors and had tubes inserted into my veins, ready to administer drugs quickly. They were young doctors in A&E and they were sure I was just about to have a heart attack. My heart was racing at around 180 bpm. The first drug they gave me was horrible and this didn't have any effect at all and it remained at 180bpm.

When the Senior Registrar came I was given 150mg of flecainide acetate. I was moved into the cardiac ward where my condition remained unchanged for the next few hours. I felt as though I had to sit up for a while, and in front of the staff, as I just sat up normally, the heart monitor just went instantly back to normal sinus rate, it literally dropped like a stone.

"Sir, you have Paroxysmal Atrial Fibrillation (PAF)."

A half hour later a Consultant Cardiologist came around, looked at the ECG print out and told me "Sir, you have Paroxysmal Atrial Fibrillation (PAF)." He told me to book an appointment to see a cardiologist and they would enlighten me...

"Finding the A-A's website opened my eyes! At last I had found a source of information and the names of people who could help me fully understand my condition and what to do about it."

It must have been fate as very shortly after this, a gentleman being interviewed on TV was describing his condition, and it seemed to be what I had. He talked about a procedure he needed but he couldn't get because of the post code lottery, and essentially his health authority said he was too old at age 61! Behind him there was a little poster propped up that said something like "Support the Arrhythmia Alliance", something I had not heard of before.

My summary of that first meeting with my electrophysiologist (EP) was that he was a man I had total confidence in and I came out feeling calm and assured. We started off with some drug therapy, a beta-blocker, bisoprolol 5mg each evening with food and a clopidigrel 75mg going to bed to give me protection against a stroke because of my heart acting like blancmange. Flecainide Acetate 150mg I kept in my back pocket always for the onset of an attack of my racing heart, all over the place. Nearly every time this worked within 20mins to bring my heart rate back to normal, but on a couple of occasions it went through the 20min barrier and then couldn't take any more of the drug for 12 hours.

The usual pattern of AF is that it happens more often and for longer periods as time goes on and I did not want to transgress from PAF into full blown AF unnecessarily if at all possible. Also the muscle of your heart actually remodels itself over time with everything that is going on. The big one is obviously an increased mortality rate over a non-AF sufferer.

My EP had said to me that I would know when the time was right for me to consider the procedure. It was bothering me on a day to day basis, I dreaded the ectopic beats, knowing that I may "spark off" at any minute and it was genuinely affecting my quality of life. I was afraid to do anything that may start it off. So I decided to go for a catheter ablation.

In February 2008 I turned up at the hospital, and had a CT scan where a harmless dye was put into my blood stream as the scanner scanned my heart. This was a fairly pleasant, warm sensation, nothing to worry about. This image of my heart would then as I understand, be transferred to the software imaging system in the operating theatre.

When my Consultant arrived. He explained again what we were going to do and I signed the consent form. We walked into the

theatre and I can only describe this as being like the inside of the Starship Enterprise, it was fantastic, nothing like the usual operating theatre.

After getting onto the bed I was gently sedated. Before we commenced, they conducted a TOE (a probe down the throat, I didn't feel a thing) this was to check there were no clots lurking around/ in my heart just before operating.

The next thing I knew, I was coming round in my bed with my wife standing next to the bed. This was a very emotional moment and I can remember saying to my wife "did they get all the gremlins?" and she said the Consultant could see why I had been so uncomfortable and he was very confident. He said they had left a mapping probe in my heart, after they had ablated for quite some time to check for further occurrences before removing the catheter.

"I have worked hard in my life and I want to make sure I'm around for as long as possible."

I felt a little nauseous coming round, but can only describe the immediate feeling as a difference between night & day. A total and instant relief. That night I slept like a baby, my sinus rhythm was 84bpm. I had a little difficulty in breathing in because of the work they had done, but it had already been explained beforehand what I may feel and why this was normal. The following morning a nurse then came along and showed me how to administer a drug called clexane, which turns off the body's normal mechanism to allow blood clotting. I was also given Warfarin.

I am now half way through a minimum 3 month course of Warfarin and have my INR blood level checked regularly. This is to make sure my blood remains thin enough during this healing time. I feel like a new man. It is just like turning the clock back to an earlier time in your

life when you were young and fit. You do not realise what a slow, debilitating slope AF puts you on until you feel the difference afterwards. Touch wood, I have had no ectopic beats at all, my sleep is undisturbed, I'm off all other drugs bar the course of Warfarin, my feet are warm because my heart is beating regularly and I feel 110% better and totally optimistic for the future. If I do have a recurrence I will certainly go and have another ablation if I need to.

"The theatre was like the Starship Enterprise, it was fantastic, nothing like the usual operating theatre."

The EP and his team have given my wife and me our life back. I cannot thank him enough for his unrivalled attention and total professionalism.

For anyone reading this I would urge you to consider that you have the right to be referred by your GP to a hospital of your choice and I'm sure the vast majority would wish to help you in your cause. However, if their answer is no, don't just sit there and accept it, you have to be prepared to go the extra mile and insist, if necessary, drawing attention to your plight. I didn't suffer this situation but in reality we have all heard of the postcode lottery.

You must check how experienced the consultant is, ask how many ablations have they done as this is still an extremely specialised area of electrophysiology. This is your right, you are entrusting your life to them and you do not want to be a guinea pig. If they refuse to tell you how many times they have done this operation just walk away.

Finally, if only someone in the government would recognise a national standard process for treating AF they would drastically reduce the number of stroke victims in the UK and in turn seriously cut spending on post stroke treatment. This of course means they can claim they have achieved something!