

Right place, right time

Collapse during cardiac rehabilitation leads to pacemaker surgery



It turned out that St. Luke's Cardiac Rehabilitation was the best place Earl Welsh, 78, could have been exercising last February – especially given his heart history.

"I had bypass surgery in 1982 and a heart attack and a triple bypass in 1996," said Welsh.

Welsh had just finished his exercise routine and was talking with a friend when he suddenly felt faint and collapsed. His wife, Ramona, who was waiting to take him home, was the first to notice that something was wrong and called for help.

Nurses Lisa Kilburg and Julie Peterson rushed over and quickly laid Welsh on the floor to prevent any further injury from a fall.

Their training kicked into gear, and a 'Code Blue' was called, as emergency responders came running from floors throughout the hospital.

As Welsh began to rally by offering a few words, the staff continued to stabilize his vital signs, monitoring his heart for pulse and rate, while pumping fluids to help elevate his blood pressure.

Abnormal heart rhythm

Once stabilized, he was transferred to the Emergency Department (ED) where the evaluation continued. His heart was irregular, skipping beats every few seconds. Cardiologists were quick to zero in on a couple of recent episodes of dizziness Welsh had experienced. However, doctors couldn't pinpoint the cause. This time, however, when the monitor showed that

his heart rate slowed significantly doctors had the information they needed.

Fortunately Welsh's long-time cardiologist, M. Naser Payvandi, MD, Cardiologists P.C., was available to evaluate the results, talk them over with Earl and Ramona and conclude that he needed a pacemaker to control his abnormal heart rhythm.

Just hours after his collapse, Earl was scheduled for the procedure.

As Dr. Payvandi explains, Welsh collapsed because his heart stopped beating for a few seconds. To counter the arrhythmia, a pacemaker – a small device about the size of a half dollar – was implanted in his chest near the collarbone, sending electrical signals to regulate his heartbeat.

Pacemaker needed

A pacemaker is a sophisticated electronic device that analyzes the function of the heart's own electrical system. When necessary, it sends tiny, precisely-timed electrical signals to the heart, to correct certain abnormalities in the heart's electrical system.

Dr. Payvandi notes that pacemakers are "fairly common" for people as they age and develop abnormalities of the cardiac electrical system.

Even better, pacemakers today are rate-responsive devices meaning they determine what the heart rate should be at any given moment, and can set the rate of pacing to that optimal heart rate.

"I tell my patients the pacemaker is like a thermostat," Dr. Payvandi said. "In winter, if you set the thermostat at 65 degrees and it's warm enough, the heat won't go on. But if it senses a drop in room temperature, it kicks in. The nice thing is that patients don't realize they have a pacemaker. They forget about it and go on with their normal way of life."

Welsh was sedated with only a local anesthesia for the 60 to 90 minute procedure, to keep him comfortable but awake so he could tell the doctors how he was feeling.

"It went very, very well," said Dr. Payvandi.

After staying overnight in the hospital to make sure the rhythm of the pacemaker was working properly, Earl went home the next day.

Today, Welsh, a former lineman and supervisor for Iowa Electric, is back to his twice-a-week exercise routine at St. Luke's, watches his grandchildren play soccer, and travels to Branson, Mo. a couple times a year with his bride of 56 years.

"I give Julie, Lisa and all the nurses and doctors at St. Luke's a lot of credit for what they did," said Welsh. "When they gave the signal, everyone showed up. They were great."

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M. Naser Payvandi, MD, Cardiologists P.C.

I am told it was the first emergency they ever had in Cardiac Rehab and I'm glad it had such a positive ending – I feel great."

Log on to stlukescr.org to watch a virtual tour of Cardiac Rehab or contact St. Luke's Heart Care Services at 319/369-7318 to learn more.



Devote seven minutes to save a life

As a community service, St. Luke's provides a free tool to raise awareness of heart disease.

The tool is called HEARTaware. It's an online assessment individuals can take in about seven minutes. It consists of a series of questions asking about an individual's risk for heart disease. Each person who takes the questionnaire receives a printout of their assessment results, which gives them information about their risk factors.

Those who are in the high risk category are offered a free assessment at

St. Luke's. This assessment includes a cholesterol and lipid screening along with a height, weight, blood pressure check and a consultation with a health professional from St. Luke's Heart Care Services. The overall goal is to identify individuals who are in the high risk category and hopefully prevent heart disease.

Learn if you're at risk for heart disease by taking the HEARTaware health risk assessment, go to stlukesheartaware.com or call 319/369-8909 to request an assessment form.

Nurse Lisa Kilburg works with Earl Welsh in St. Luke's Cardiac Rehabilitation.