

## Neil's Story

**Sunday 18th January 2009 started off as a perfectly ordinary day, but nearly ended in disaster.**

After a late breakfast, my wife and I went to watch our grandson playing Sunday league football. As I stood on the touch line, I had been feeling fine when I experienced an awful pain in my chest and I fell to the ground unable to get up. One of the parents at the football match was a nurse. On realising there was a problem, called an ambulance. The paramedics arrived and treated me for a heart attack and I was taken to Arrowe Park Hospital. I was treated in Accident & Emergency and then transferred to a heart ward, to be seen by a consultant the next day.

Monday 19<sup>th</sup> January was a day of shock and fear. My consultant arrived with his team of students and I was connected to various pieces of equipment, then he asked each student for a diagnosis. The consultant showed me on the monitor, a flap of skin which looked like it was “moving in the wind” and he told me that I would need a major operation to fix it or I would die. This had to be done immediately and arrangements were then made to transfer me to the Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital and my wife was called in to the hospital to be advised of my condition.

After a high speed transfer, with a police escort to Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital, I was taken straight into a ward where the staff began to prep me for theatre and I was informed that I was very fortunate that Mr Oo was available to perform the surgery. In addition to the CT scan, done at Arrowe Park Hospital, a further scan was done and Mr Oo and his team came to see me at the bedside. There were lots of forms that needed my signature and I was advised of all the risks associated with the surgery, but told not to worry as we can manage these, this is what we do!

I have always enjoyed good health, so I was terrified at the prospect of what lay ahead and I cannot imagine how my wife and daughter felt as I kissed my wife for what could have been the last time and I was taken to theatre. My last recollection was being told “we will look after you” by the theatre staff and I was given an injection to put me to sleep.

“Go back to sleep we will take you off the ventilator at 2.30 were the words I recall, on Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> January after I had survived seven hours surgery. Mr Oo had left the hospital around 3am and my wife had been advised to go home but came back as quickly as she could. Before the surgery I had asked if having a tube in my mouth, from the ventilator, would make me sick. When I awoke it was good to be ok as it was removed and a drink of iced water was offered, as the realization that I had survived and was in Critical Care dawned on me.

It was good to have my wife close by; she had been prepared by staff to see me connected to numerous monitors and drips which would have been worrying her. I spent four days in Critical Care and I have only praise for the staff there. You are cared for on a one-to-one basis and are never alone. On the day after the surgery I was helped to sit out in a chair and I carefully looked, for the first time, at the dressing down the middle of my chest.

After my time in Critical Care, I was moved to the main ward and I was visited daily by medical staff for blood tests and daily ECG's. I began to dread the ECG visit as it consistently showed an irregular heart beat. It was decided that eventually that the heart beat problem would be treated by giving me an electric shock procedure, in theatre. I was distressed by this news and my wife spent the day with me. Just before I was to go to theatre my heart rhythm settled and it was decided I would not have this treatment. Eleven days after my surgery I was discharged home.

Bathing and simple daily tasks were a struggle at first, walking upstairs was hard but with the support from my wife I began to take short outdoor walks, aiming to get a little bit further each time. A reoccurrence of the irregular heart beat meant I was readmitted to Arrowe Park Hospital, three weeks later and I had my cardioversion performed. This partially settled the problem and I was given medication to support this.

As I was admitted as an emergency patient to the Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital I was not prepared for the psychological effects that having major surgery can have on a patient. Frequent bouts of tears and feelings of despair regularly happened. Fortunately I had a very supportive GP who explained to me that this was a natural process and this would pass. She prescribed me a mild tranquiliser and she was very supportive to my wife who had to deal with my low moods. I remember thinking why have I gone through emergency surgery to end up feeling like this.

The turning point seemed to occur when I had my first visit to the Wirral Heart Support Group for cardiac rehabilitation. They contacted me on discharge from Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital and I attended their unit at St Catherine's Hospital for a three hour session a week. This involved an exercise programme and discussions on heart/health matters.

It has now been heading towards three years since my aortic dissection. My wife and I attend a gym three times a week for a two hour session and I have never felt fitter. The annual checks at Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital are reassuring and the memories fade with time. The scar down my chest is a reminder, as are the two blood pressure tablets and the aspirin I take daily. Life is good!

I would like to particularly thank [Mr Oo](#) and his team without, whose skills I would not have survived and also to my wife Hilary whose love and support never faltered in the worst time of our lives together.

**Neil Towers**