

Heart protocol a life saver

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GRATEFUL FOR NEW PROTOCOL: John Hardiman and his wife, Diane, returned to the Trillium Health Centre last week to thank Halton EMS and Trillium cardiology teams who treated him at the Cardiac Regional Direct PPCI (Primary Percutaneous Coronary Intervention) Program for STEMI (ST-Elevation Myocardial Infarction) in December.

Nikki Wesley –Burlington Post

A typical early riser, Halton resident John Hardiman awoke at 7:30 a. m. four days before Christmas feeling slightly nauseous.

He and his wife, Diane, had been out late the night before at a Christmas party, but John had only drunk a couple of beers.

Unsure what the problem was, he settled in to watch some television. Then came the back pain, followed by arm numbness and vomiting.

“About 11 a. m., I heard pounding on the stairs,” recalled Diane. “Next thing I know, he’s laying on the ground. He’s hunched over and sweating, his arm was numb.”

It was time to call 911.

Within a few minutes, Halton EMS paramedics arrived at the Hardiman family’s house near Derry Road and Farmstead Drive, only a few hundred metres from Milton District Hospital.

The two experienced paramedics, Tony Chapman of Waterdown and Laura Dutchak from Burlington, recognized the symptoms as those of a heart attack. John did not suffer chest pain. The duo attached electrodes to his body and looked at the results from the 12-lead electrocardiogram.

“One we got him on the ECG...we knew,” explained Chapman, a burly 39-year-old originally from south London, England. “We knew what we had to do.”

The paramedics picked up the phone, spoke to a doctor, and then told Diane they were going to bypass Milton's hospital's emergency department and drive more than 30 kilometres away to Trillium Health Centre in Mississauga.

The extra distance might have saved years of John's life.

Bypassing Trillium's ER and with a doctor and nurses at the ready, John was rushed immediately into the hospital's cardiac cath lab. There, interventional cardiologist Dr. Charles Lazzam identified John's blocked artery and inserted a balloon catheter and stent to open it up — a procedure commonly called angioplasty.

Less than 90 minutes after Chapman and Dutchak made the initial diagnosis, John's blood flow was clear again.

"The next day, I was back in Milton," noted John, a thin 44-year-old with a 20-year-old daughter and 14-year-old son. "I'm happy to tell you, I did make it home for Christmas.

"I feel good now. Honestly, I wouldn't know I had a heart attack."

John's now back working with his 83-year-old father at the family business, J. Hardiman Roofing, as he has for the past 30 years.

However, if John's heart attack had struck only one week earlier, he might not be feeling so up-and-about.

That's because he was the first Halton resident to benefit from a new protocol launched on Dec. 14, 2008 where patients diagnosed with a specific type of heart attack, called ST-Elevation Myocardial Infarction (STEMI) are transported directly to the regional cardiac centre at Trillium, instead of local hospital emergency wards.

Previously, John would have gone to Milton's emergency department and been administered clot-busting medication which only open clogged arteries 60-65 per cent of the time compared to the 99 per cent success rate of angioplasty, according to Dr. Randy Watson, a Trillium cardiologist and co-lead of the STEMI program along with Greg Sage of Halton EMS.

Opening clogged arteries as soon as possible is imperative. When heart muscle doesn't receive blood and oxygen, it can't heal itself. Losing time means possibly losing muscle.

That's why the STEMI program has set a 90-minute target from time of diagnosis to treatment. Currently, it's surpassing its goals. Since the program launch, the average time from a paramedic's arrival at the patient's side to a cardiologist restoring the flow of blood through the artery was 77 minutes. So far, 11 Halton residents have benefited from the new protocol

For now, the protocol affects residents of Oakville, Milton and Halton Hills, communities that fall into the province's Mississauga-Halton Local Health Integration Network and which are served by hospitals in the Halton Healthcare Services corporation, which has supported the new protocol.

Trillium plans to expand the 24-7 program to residents of Peel and west Toronto.

There is a separate protocol for responding to calls from Burlington residents, who are taken to Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital for physician evaluation and then transferred to Hamilton General Hospital if necessary.

Last week, John returned to Trillium to promote the STEMI program and say thanks to Dr. Lazzam and nurses Mary Lou Mendoza, Margaret Brzoza and Sandra Dowers.

"I almost teared up," said John. "You don't realize how many people that it does take to get you healthy, to get you on your feet."

Though he has to take medication, John's spirit is buoyed by his physical last week where he was declared "fit as a horse."

A non-smoker, healthy eater and not a heavy drinker with no family history of heart disease, John never expected to have a heart attack though he's thankful for the STEMI program.

"It was just in time for me," he said. "It's definitely going to save lives, I have no doubt about that."

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Heart-attack warning signs

Thousands of Canadians die from heart attacks every year because they don't get medical treatment quickly enough. Learn to recognize important signs of a heart attack.

Pain

- Sudden discomfort or pain that does not go away with rest
- Pain that may be in the chest, neck, jaw, shoulder, arms or back
- Pain that may feel like burning, squeezing, heaviness, tightness or pressure
- In women, pain may be more vague
- Chest pain or discomfort that is brought on with exertion and goes away with rest

Shortness of breath

- Difficulty breathing

Nausea

- Indigestion
- Vomiting
- Cool, clammy skin

Sweating Fear

- Anxiety
- Denial

If you are experiencing any of these signals, you should:

- Call 9-1-1 immediately, or have someone call for you
- Stop all activity and sit or lie down, in whatever position is most comfortable
- If you take nitroglycerin, take your normal dosage
- If you are experiencing chest pain, chew and swallow one adult 325 mg ASA tablet (acetylsalicylic acid) or two 80 mg tablets. Pain medicines such as acetaminophen (e. g. Tylenol) or ibuprofen (e. g. Advil) do not work the same way as ASA (i. e. Aspirin) and therefore will not help in the emergency situation described above
- Rest comfortably and wait for emergency medical services (EMS) to arrive

Source of information: Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario.