

## Missing the beat

### *Living with atrial fibrillation*



(NC)—The steady beat of our heart; it's something that just happens for most of us, every second of every day. But what if your heart felt like a car engine that continuously fired out of sequence and instead of beating 1-2-3-4, it beats 1-4-2-3. This is how Graham McDonald – married and a father of three – who was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation, describes the condition to his friends and family.

Atrial fibrillation is a serious heart condition that is characterized by an irregular or rapid heart beat. While it is quite common, a 2009 national survey conducted by Leger Marketing revealed that awareness levels of this condition are very low. This, despite the fact that if left unchecked, it can lead to serious health consequences, including stroke.

Graham had always led a healthy, active life and that's why his family and friends were shocked when he was diagnosed in his late 40's with atrial fibrillation. After experiencing some of the common symptoms associated with the condition, including a rapid heart beat and dizziness, Graham visited his doctor and was immediately taken to the emergency room. When he was diagnosed, his heart was beating a stunning 212 beats a minute, and he says the doctor was concerned that he was on the verge of having a stroke.

"I had never heard of atrial fibrillation before I was diagnosed with it. But after experiencing the symptoms – and now that I understand the condition – I realize that I had it previously in my life in small bouts. The episodes didn't last for very long periods of time, but they did cause chest pains, which I just wrote off as stress," explains Graham. "Because it would go away after an hour or so, I never reported it to my doctor, which, in hindsight, I should have. "

Atrial fibrillation symptoms, which can also include shortness of breath and light-headedness, can be debilitating for some and living with the condition can greatly affect one's quality of life. In the Leger Marketing survey, close to half (46 per cent) of the respondents who reported they had been diagnosed with atrial fibrillation stated that this condition has a negative impact on their daily activities<sup>1</sup>. In Graham's case, he says that simple everyday tasks became difficult.

"I was tired all the time," explains Graham. "Working around the house became very difficult, I was no longer able to do the chores that I had done before; and just trying to cut the grass would exhaust me."

There are certain risk factors that can increase one's chances of developing atrial fibrillation. Heart valve disease and heart failure are two of them, but other more common conditions such as high blood pressure and excess weight could also be linked to atrial fibrillation. While having these risk factors does not necessarily mean that an individual will develop atrial fibrillation, the likelihood of developing this condition does increase with age. Most often it occurs in patients over the age of 65.

Some medical professionals believe that more and more people will be diagnosed with atrial fibrillation in the future, given the growing numbers of aging baby boomers in the country.

According to Dr. Paul Dorian, Director, Division of Cardiology, University of Toronto, a much better job needs to be done to educate the general community and patients about this condition. "The earlier we diagnosis it, the earlier we can give treatment and the more strokes we're going to prevent," he says.

Graham says he would encourage anyone who thinks they may have experienced episodes of atrial fibrillation to talk to their doctor about their symptoms. He says he wishes he had spoken up sooner.

- News Canada