

Eileen's story

Briefly my AF started about 10 plus years ago, I woke up one morning and found that I couldn't stand up for very long without feeling very faint. Got breakfast for everyone sitting down, and then drove my daughter to school, that in itself was hairy, windows wide open, and laying seat down flat. I ended up at my GP and from there straight to A&E. I spent hours there being monitored, it resolved on its own. They said it was my age, I was 52 and it wouldn't happen again. I was already on beta blockers for high blood pressure, which I had been taking for 20 or so years.

Well, about 3 weeks later it happened again, so back to the GP and to A&E, this time I was admitted and they changed my drugs from Atenolol to Sotolol. My AF reverted once again on its own and I went home. To cut a long story short I then spent weeks visiting my GP as I felt so unwell. I ended up back in A&E the day before Christmas Eve for an ECG as my GP was concerned. That was a mistake, well it was for me, the ECG showed changes and they kept me in all over Christmas. I had an angiogram and that was negative so that at least was reassuring.

I still felt awful, tired, depressed, short of breath and my previously controlled blood pressure was all over the shop. When they told me that this was the best life was going to be, and I would just have to get used to it, I was horrified. Luckily we had health insurance and used this to go and see a top cardiologist.

He said that this was not the best it would get as most of these symptoms were due to the Sotolol, I had most of the side effects and on top of that I was not on a high enough dose to control my blood pressure. I was put back on Atenolol and then had a long struggle getting my BP back to normal. About 3 months later the AF kicked in again and I ended up in A&E about every 6 weeks, sometimes having a cardioversion, sometimes nothing, neither of which worked for very long.

Eventually a cardioversion didn't work and the AF stubbornly stayed put, I had been in hospital about 5 days when they decided to do an ablation. This worked for a while and at least it got rid of the flutter, but the AF didn't go away. I had another cardioversion about 6 weeks later. I think I went three months then it started playing up again. It was quite a long time ago.

Any way in 2006 I had a PVI, fortunately it was done under general anaesthetic as it took nearly 8 hours. I felt pretty rough when I woke up and was kept in an extra day, then I went home and although I was tired, it took about 3 months to get back to feeling normal. I do remember having medications altered during this time, but I really can't remember which ones. This worked and I was relatively free from AF, or at least I could cope with what I was getting, for about 18 months. During this time both children left home, my son went to New Zealand, my daughter went to university, and we moved house. I thought all my problems were solved and then suddenly about 3 weeks after my 60th birthday I went back into AF and the saga began again.

Since then I had two more ablations, neither worked for very long and of course my tablets kept getting changed to try and ease the AF. In 2008 while I was in hospital again, the AF had resolved and I was due to go home, then my heart decided to slow down. Luckily I was on the monitor so they picked up that my rate had dropped to below 30, so it was decided that as I was now

bradycardic as well as tachycardic, and that I would need a pacemaker so that they could continue with the drugs to control the AF.

Once again for a while I felt ok and then the AF continued, the good thing about the pacemaker is that it showed how often and for how long I was in AF. I spent Christmas 2008 in hospital again and had to delay a trip to NZ until the AF was better controlled. I was put on digoxin and this settled the AF and I was eventually able to go on holiday just a few weeks late. But I felt awful, when I came back to the UK I discovered the nausea and all the other symptoms were due to the Digoxin so that was stopped and within 3 weeks I was back in AF.

At this point after lots of discussions we decided that as I already had a pacemaker in situ I would be a good candidate for an AV node ablation. This doesn't stop the AF but it does stop the symptoms so at least life would be a bit more comfortable. This was carried out in May 2009, it has certainly made life more comfortable, unfortunately I was still quite symptomatic so I have not stopped the drugs, which is what we hoped would happen. Things did gradually improve and now I am ok, certainly no more hospitalisations for the AF although I am still aware of it at times and life is now good.

I have a pacemaker check every 6 months and only have to see the EP's if I am worried. I will be on warfarin for life, and medication for my blood pressure. I take Candesarten and Diltiazem, and statins.

Yes I am still very aware when my heart changes rhythm but I think I always will be. All in all I am glad I went down this route as it has certainly made my life much more enjoyable and has the added benefit of stopping the family worrying.