



How Suffering and Curing Atrial Fibrillation Changed My Life

By Michael Coleman

The two visits for my Executive Health Check, one in September 2002, and the next September 2003, could not have presented more surprising or contrasting advice on my heart function.

Having maintained a regular diet/exercise regime all my adult life, including competing in long "community" running events and ocean swims, I watched on with near smugness as my doctor tore off the cardiogram, knowingly surveyed the pattern and would pronounce, year after year "this Michael, is a heart that functions in the top 5% for your age, you have been blessed with a "Ferrari of an engine"!

In September of 2003 at the age of 42 all this veered wildly onto a totally unfamiliar road. After feeling uncharacteristically light-headed and fatigued following several exercise sessions, my vigilant gym manager suggested that I promptly see my doctor. The same doctor's cardiogram revealed that my heart was in atrial fibrillation...I needed to see a cardiologist fast!!

The early days with AF were a mixture of disbelief that my previously bullet proof heart function had gone awry, with general confidence that a cure would be quickly found, and life as usual, would return.

The "cure" presented to me by my cardiologist was to medicate the heart into finding it's former silky rhythm. I was given a 60% chance that the prescribed beta-blocker would fix the AF. When, after 3 weeks, this medication had no effect, I had an electro cardioversion, which held me in normal sinus rhythm for just 2 days. I was also told from this point that I needed to try other medications and that there could be some side effects.

Though every body is different, in my case I was hit hard by the drug protocol, and in hindsight should have listened much more carefully to my protesting body... instead I embarked on an increasingly desperate quest to find normal sinus rhythm, with drugs as my only "hope" for a cure. This quest saw me anxiously consuming increasingly high doses of Sotalol, Amiodarone, Tambocor, Quinidine, Metoprolol, Isoptin, and Rythmodan.

Daily life began to become more challenging, with the combination of an average 5 hrs/day in AF, as well as a constant run of side effects from the medications. Lethargy would descend over me, insomnia, headaches, weight loss, and most debilitating of all, depression, littered my life.

My former rigorous exercise regime was pared back to shuffling my local streets... wondering "why me"?

After 12 months (August 2004) I underwent a flutter ablation in Sydney. This, combined with a huge (450 mg) daily dose of Tambocor, kept me in NSR for about 1 month. The resumption of AF coincided with the sad passing of my dear Dad. I can't help think, in hindsight, that the "heartbreak" I felt at the time translated literally to my physiology.

When we are sick or suffering disease, every person has, in trying to rebalance their health, a threshold of questioning whether their path is correct. The turning point for me was sitting, half asleep in front of my family doctor, desperately seeking yet one more medication solution. "We can try something experimental, he offered. You can take 2 different anti-arrhythmic drugs, as well as a beta-blocker. This should cover ALL electrical paths, and stop the AF". I pondered this strategy, quietly desperate, "What's the worst case scenario doc?" I asked. "Heart block", he replied, "where your heart stops and you lose consciousness". I thanked him for his time and walked out of his surgery. Knowing that he was recommending I experiment out of desperation with even more drugs – effectively putting my hand up and saying. "Body I have no respect for your myriad of miraculous healing systems, and opt to become a western medicine junkie". I knew this was just a "band aid" approach, and vowed to start looking at more natural alternatives.

About this time, I discovered Hans Larsen's research, and was extremely impressed by his drive to assist others dealing with AF. I subscribed to his newsletter, made contact with nutrient specialist Dr Michael Lam in California, and commenced a new "hope inspiring" nutrient protocol, in concert with visits to an excellent Sydney-based naturopath, Catherine Pritchard.

Sadly, solving the AF riddle with nutrients alone was never possible in my case, for every time I reduced the drug dosage, my AF would "spike", and I never had the nerve to withstand 24/7 AF, while waiting to see if the nutrients alone would cure me.

In the background, my Sydney cardiologist, a caring guy with a big reputation, Dr David Whalley, was increasingly blunt about my best possibility of a cure. He was suggesting pulmonary vein ablation (with about a 40% chance of a cure, [ie. no AF, no drugs, 6 months after procedure]).

It was Hans' research into global PVI success rates that convinced me to finally try and get off the medication merry go round, and have the ablation procedure– in France. My confidence was further buoyed, when Hans reported on his web site that he had travelled to France for a completely successful cure.

I booked my PVI and flights for my wife and 2 children, just days later, in May 2005. Every aspect of my dealing with the Hospital Haut Leveque, Bordeaux, was impressive. The French have constructed a formidably efficient, professional healing system.

During the 7 months waiting time, I admit trying desperately, to find an alternative cure, which would allow me to defer or avoid what I had convinced myself was "playing my last card". I was still telling friends as close as 2 weeks from departure for France, that I thought I was "stable" enough to delay the procedure. A positive aspect of my nutrient protocol was that I was so full of vitamins that my immune system had been failsafe, for 24 months I had no illness of any sort. Interestingly, the mounting stress of the journey, as a family, "into the French unknown", crashed into me just 1 week prior to departure, when I contracted a nasty respiratory virus spending the first 4 days in years in bed. I recall corresponding 2 days before leaving Australia, with Dr Pierre Jais (who replied patiently to a stream of my emails over 6 months) at the Bordeaux Hospital, and telling him of my concern for undergoing surgery, after being belted by a virus..."You should come, Mr. Coleman, we can wait until your chance of success is best".

In reality, the PVI procedure is now so regularly performed in Bordeaux, that significant risk of injury/mortality has practically been eliminated. The "last card" I had imagined, was a classic case of patient anxiety.

Prof Michel Haissaguerre had been "talked up" to legendary status by Hans Larsen and even my own Australian cardiologist, but meeting him and witnessing the total passion and confidence with which he

operates, took my estimation to a new level. He is an exceptional electrophysiologist. I noticed very soon after my first meeting with Michel, that he moved at most times around the hospital with a small army of supporters, all seeming to hang on every word of his medical judgment and experience.

For my first procedure, December 12, 2005, I was surprised at the resources involved – 5 EPs, (including three professors of cardiology and 2 nurses). The procedure consisted of a PVI of all 4 veins. An ablation line was performed at the roof of the left atrium connecting both superior pulmonary veins and terminating AF.

I was carefully monitored for several days in Bordeaux, which has some of the best post-operative care for this procedure, worldwide. Just as well, as in my case, one of the 4 veins had become conductive... and this necessitated a second procedure 3 days after the first. I was naturally quite apprehensive about needing a second procedure so soon after the first, but Prof Michel soon allayed my fears with his absolute conviction that my history of numerous 24 hr+ episodes of AF, pre-determined that I would be a “difficult” case to cure.

The second procedure consisted of a second line performed at the left isthmus between the left inferior pulmonary vein and mitral annulus resulting in a complete bi-directional block. All in all, in Prof Haissaguerre’s words, “The ablation equivalent of the surgical maze procedure...”

The care shown by all at Haut Leveque was exceptional. I felt like I was being treated as though I was “family” to Prof Haissaguerre and his team. I had my own young family with me (my beloved Jacqueline refused point blank to have it any other way), and an abiding memory of Prof Michel, is the way in which he reacted to meeting my 9-year-old son, Callum.

Cal was clearly overwhelmed by the sight of me returning from the first procedure, a little pale and lethargic. Prof Haissaguerre quickly assumed the role of ‘surrogate dad’, put a comforting arm around my son, and led him quietly to the telemetry station, to show and explain to him the new sinus rhythm of my heart. This man is a completely empathetic, dedicated practitioner!

The day after the second procedure, Prof Michel confidently informed my wife that I may well have small episodes of AF and extra “ectopic” beats for the next months as the scar tissue formed new electrical pathways, but ... “he is cured”. He said this with such confident emphasis that I remember feeling quietly elated that my suffering would soon be over.

Two other doctors deserve special mention, being Dr Pierre Jais, and Prof Prash Sanders. They were completely involved in thoroughly addressing my myriad of questions pre and post procedures, and struck me as both being “at the top of their game”.

Haissaguerre’s prediction of slight AF and ectopic beats was very accurate. I had several 15-min AF episodes during the ensuing 3 weeks. In addition, extra beats have occurred spasmodically right up until the last few days. As any doctor will advise, “ectopic” heartbeats are quite normal.

However, it is now over 4.5 months since I have experienced an AF episode, and following an extremely slow medication withdrawal, I am practically “drug free” (1.25mg bisoprolol/day) I am also back in training for a 10km community fun run in 8 weeks time.

My life has changed irrevocably to being far more mindful of “living in the moment”. Mainly, I have discovered this simple joy through the practice of daily relaxation meditation. I am a more compassionate, and grateful, human being than ever. I have never felt physically or mentally tougher in my entire life. I have a new depth of love and respect for my wife Jacqueline and children Kaitlin and Callum. We did it as a team!

The journey through AF has given me all of these insights. If I can help alleviate the torment of just one person’s AF through this story, I will be content. I sincerely hope that my story provides further belief to those who need it.

Postscript

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My life continues happily with normal sinus rhythm and I am so grateful.

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