

THE AFIB REPORT

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My Journey to Sinus Rhythm

By Jeff Zorn

I suffered terribly from chronic (permanent) afib from April 1986 (I was 41 years old) to July 2003. For most of that period I was medicated with some combination of digoxin, a beta-blocker, verapamil, Coumadin, and an anti-arrhythmic (sotalol, Norpace, amiodarone, flecainide, etc.). Each change of drug tended to work for a while at a low dosage, then I'd be fibbing almost all the time again, the dosage got upped, and eventually I'd go to the next, stronger drug. I remember blacking out many times under a new drug, getting dizzy and looking for a comfortable piece of the floor to roll down onto. Even after we settled on the same, ineffective dose of flecainide, I fainted many times just standing up, especially in the morning after I'd been lying down for hours.

Between the medicines and the condition itself, many parts of my life got badly messed up: sleep, digestion (chronic constipation), cognition, sexual function (impotence is listed as one possible side-effect of many of those drugs), general physical condition (I couldn't exercise at all, really--and in the '80's I had run 7 full marathons, played full-court basketball at a high level, etc.), and family life, especially in the role of father of two young children.

I made many trips to the emergency room, my heart racing so fast that no recognizable "beat" could be felt. I was cardioverted about a dozen times, but the last few times the arrhythmia came back before I made it to my car. My cardiologist then advised me not to be cardioverted again.

Before that, a good few times that I went to the emergency room, my heart settled down nicely before cardioversion was attempted. I now see that I had developed terrible anxiety from the afib, though I had been told it's nothing like a fatal condition; it just felt like I would die, or collapse in public, and I developed panic-attack syndrome. My panic culminated in some awful episodes in my car (where I had to pull over on the freeway, pull off the road, etc.) and at work. Eventually my brother-in-law, who is a doctor, prescribed me some Ativan (lorazepam), and that helped a lot. I went to some classes at Kaiser about panic attack, and they helped as well, and I got off the Ativan. But I never was confident about walking anywhere, speaking in public, or just doing anything "exciting" that would raise my heart rate and get the arrhythmia more chaotic--anything that would get my juices flowing, and as a result, I became very careful, detached. It's impossible to be bon vivant and full of good cheer and positive chi when you're in afib or dreading that you soon will be back in afib.

No cardiologist ever made the connection between emotion and heart function for me. More generally, my cardiologists tended not to be interested in what put me into afib and what got me out of it, even while those were the most important things in my life. With all due respect, the cardiologists became well-meaning pill-pushers.

I had my first catheter ablation operation in 1999. I looked forward to it as a possible cure for my condition: just take it out, burn away the "hot spots" in the atrium that were sending the extra signals. Well, it didn't work. One thing I saw was that the surgeons could only go on what they were seeing that day, that moment. Afib is a chaotic heart rhythm, and while they did stimulate my heart and burn away a number of apparent "hot spots," quite evidently there were more, as I was back in afib two days after the operation. I had my second catheter ablation in 2001: same story.

By the time I had my third ablation, Dr. Lauer was confident that the procedure had come a long way. Instead of looking for specific "hot spots", they would essentially wall off the whole area of the pulmonary vein from which extra signals develop. The extra signals would still be there, but they wouldn't make it out into the area where they could mess up the heartbeat. To make a long story short, I had one brief (but scary) episode of afib about a month after the procedure, converted spontaneously back to sinus rhythm, and have been in sinus rhythm ever since, about nine months now.

The differences in quality of life are huge. I exercise pretty vigorously; I am potent again; I think better; I have more endurance; I am far more relaxed, happier, and easier to live with; more productive at work; braver, out more, keeping up with my kids; eating more and gaining weight--not really a good thing, but I had been semi-starving myself, as food put me right into afib. I am off digoxin fully, and have cut back on my other drugs. I hope to be off all but a little beta-blocker by next month.

I hope my experience with being (for now) cured of atrial fibrillation soon becomes the norm. I'd advise all afib sufferers to go for some such cure for the condition, not be satisfied with "rate control" and some partial relief from anti-arrhythmic drugs. I had come, I think, to live with chronic afib pretty well: I didn't get upset, despondent, or anxious any more when I went into it, and when in it, I slogged on the best I could, just kind of breathed deeply, lived in the moment and tried not to get too run down. But the cure has made all that seem like part of another life already, one I'd rather forget. Hooray for Dr. Michael Lauer and the Kaiser system for covering the three operations.

I hope you all come to feel as good as you did before afib struck.

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