

Fighting for Every Heartbeat

Following my brief testimony in Church on the 19th of April, I thought I'd share a bit more detail on my lifelong fight for every heartbeat.

The current slogan for the British Heart Foundation is "Fight for every heartbeat" and it's a slogan that sums up the majority of my life. Looking back over the past 50 years and I think there are only a few years when I could say that I haven't been fighting, in some way, for every heartbeat.

For those of you who don't know, I was born with a hole-in-the-heart which required open heart surgery. For the first 7 years of my life (which I don't remember very well) I survived while I became bigger and stronger to allow the heart operation to take place in 1973. After my operation I was put on a drug called digoxin to control and slow my heartbeat. The drug worked very well, in fact, at some points, too well. I can remember having to get up some nights to do sit ups just so I could feel my heartbeat.

On the other hand after I'd played football or had an over active night at Boys' Brigade, for example, I can remember sitting in a chair with my heartbeat racing and pounding away for hours. At that time I had no way of dealing with this powerful fast beat until I went to see a new Doctor at Southport Infirmary, when I was 21. He told me how to perform the Valsalva manoeuvre which involves holding your breath while crouching down to force a fast heartbeat to return to its normal rhythm. This was a revelation to me and over the next 18 or so years I used this manoeuvre countless times after playing football, climbing up a hill, refereeing a football match, putting up tents or if I bent down too quickly to pick something up.

The manoeuvre continued to help me live my life and control the fast, strong beats until 2004 when my heart started going fast doing everyday things like standing up too quickly, climbing stairs and playing with my kids. After a few stays in hospital, to control my heart via intravenous drugs, I was diagnosed with Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome (WPW). This led to me having a catheter ablation procedure in October 2004 and I was amazed how such a "simple" short procedure could have such a massive effect on my life. Very soon after having the procedure, my heart started to behave itself for the first time in my life, it started beating very quietly and the fast rates were a thing of the past – or so I thought. It took me about a year to recover from the events in 2004, I occasionally had flutters or stronger beats but gradually they disappeared and I started, with the help of my dog Kizzy, to grow fitter and more resilient. By 2006 I was really starting to see the benefits of my "new" heart but as my confidence grew, so did my workload at work.

I've always been very good at keeping the work/life balance in check but from 2010 to 2014, I became more preoccupied with work and it took over my life. I was over-stretched, over-exposed and in some instances out of my depth. In 2011/2012 I started retching and coughing every morning through the stress of a piece of work that has gone on to earn hundreds of thousands of pounds for the company I work for.

Thankfully, even though I was off work with stress for 6 weeks in 2012, my heart didn't show any signs of being affected. The stressful work didn't end there. In 2013 and 2014, I was involved in two more projects that just added to the build-up. All that was needed was a trigger.

That trigger came on the 11th of April 2014. I'd had a busy week, besides work I'd done a brunch for Jake's trip to Thailand, got Sam to the airport for his trip to Iceland and visited the dentist for 2 fillings.

While my mouth was numb, the dentist decided to tackle a 3rd filling that wasn't necessary and while she was drilling she caught and cut my gum. I didn't think any more of it but the next day, while I was sat at my desk in work, my heart started to flutter. The flutter continued for the rest of the day, gradually getting worse as the day went on. I took myself to bed when I got home hoping to "sleep it off".

Unfortunately, it's very difficult to sleep when your heart is doing gymnastics in your chest, I was used to it pounding away in a rhythmical pattern, but this was different, this was very erratic. Missed beats, extra beats, faster beats, runs and stops. I tried all the techniques to bring it under control but to no avail.

All the time I was petrified that the cut to my gum had allowed an infection called endocarditis (an infection caused by dental treatment that slowly degrades your heart) to affect my heart. I thought I'd need to go back into hospital to get it reverted back to normal rhythm but that filled me with dread so I kept giving it an extra 5 minutes and hoped it would stop.

36 hours later and with what felt like 5 different pulses beating away in my body (1 in each arm, 1 in each leg and one in my chest) I was just about to give up and call an ambulance.

I lay with my arms folded and said a little prayer. This was at 5 to midnight on the 12th of April, by 5 passed midnight I was lying in bed with a big smile on my face. Somehow, and for whatever reason, my heart had return to its normal beat and it was beating as if the last 36 hours had never happened. My body started to recover and I could feel the blood flowing back to my extremities.

Was it a miracle or a coincidence? I'll let you answer that question but I know, as I lay there drifting off to sleep for the first time in 2 nights, that it felt incredibly Heavenly! Since that lengthy attack, I've had a few less violent episodes (i.e. a 15 hour one in May 2014 and a few shorter ones). Now I'm in a much better place, I've removed as many triggers as I can from my life (i.e. caffeine and alcohol), I'm exercising as much and as moderately as I can and, after having a bit of an Epiphany a few weeks ago, I'm determined not to let work and the stress associated to affect me in such a deep and profound way as it has previously. Enough is enough and I want my life back.

I feel incredibly fortunate and thankful to still be here but I know how short life is and how it can change in a heartbeat. The fight for that heart beat goes on and to use another slogan from the British Heart Foundation – “It’s Great to be Alive”.

Thanks and never forget – Every Day Is a Bonus! :-)

Mike Owen