

Breathing Deeply

Nothing Short of a Miracle

By: Roxanne Jones



SPECIAL NOTE: *Eisenhower Medical Center recently opened the Eisenhower Pulmonary Specialty Clinic on the main campus in the Wright Building, Suite 201. For more information, call 760-834-3564.*

Betty Benner was only in her late forties in 1991 when she began experiencing extreme shortness of breath. An avid walker, she had been clocking five miles almost daily, yet found herself having to stop to catch her breath.

"At first, I attributed it to getting older," she says. "But I wasn't that old."

By the time Benner reached her mid-fifties, she was really struggling. "I was having trouble singing lullabies to my grandchildren," she recalls. "I couldn't walk across the street without gasping for breath and no one could figure out what was going on."

In 1997 at a hospital in Oregon, Benner had her first perfusion lung scan, an imaging exam that shows the pattern of blood flow in the lungs. It revealed that she had a condition called chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension (CTEPH).

In people with CTEPH, blood clots lodge in segments of the lungs. This condition increases the blood pressure in the pulmonary (lung) artery, which carries oxygen-poor blood from the lower chamber on the right side of the heart (right ventricle) to the lungs where it picks up oxygen. The increased pressure puts a strain on the right ventricle and, as a result, it begins to weaken. This, in turn, causes symptoms such as shortness of breath, fatigue, dizziness and fainting, heart palpitations and chest pain — all with only minimal exertion.

Benner spent a week in the hospital on a heparin drip (a blood thinner administered intravenously) to help restore blood flow to her lungs, and was told she'd have to take Coumadin® (warfarin, a blood thinner taken orally) for the rest of her life to prevent clot formation. The doctor told Benner's husband that she might have only two to five years to live because her condition was progressive and couldn't be cured.

Over the next few years, their business took the Benners to live in Maui, Hawaii, then to Roseville in northern California. During this time, Benner saw several different pulmonologists.

"They all reviewed my films, but other than keeping me on Coumadin, no one thought there was anything they could do," says Benner.

In 2008, Mrs. Benner and her husband visited the Coachella Valley for a "winter warm-up." They liked the desert so much that they moved, settling in La Quinta.

Benner began seeing Eisenhower Medical Center Internist John Samples, MD for her primary care. He suggested that she contact Hassan Bencheqroun, MD, FCCP, a specialist in interventional pulmonology and critical care.

"I was burned out," says Benner. "I'd had every test possible and had resigned myself to 'this is what it is.' But Dr. Samples made sure I got an appointment with Dr. Bencheqroun, and the rest is history."

"When I first saw Betty, her opening statement was 'every year, I'm losing a little bit more of my breath,'" Dr. Bencheqroun recalls. "She could walk, but the distance was getting shorter and shorter, and she used a wheelchair whenever she went shopping. She was on supplemental oxygen. Once in a while, she'd have heart palpitations and feel lightheaded, signs of severe blood clots in her lung that were putting a strain on her heart."

Benner also remembers that first meeting. "He was such a delight," she says. "He said, 'I will not be afraid of telling you the truth, and I will always treat you like one of my own.'"

Dr. Bencheqroun ordered a series of tests for Benner. He also had Benner see a hematologist (blood specialist) to see if she could find a cause for why Benner's blood formed so many clots. Dr. Bencheqroun suspected she might have a genetic predisposition, since several of her family members had had early heart attacks and strokes.

"There was a pattern of blood anomalies in my family, but no one else had put it together before Dr. Bencheqroun," recalls Benner.

Most importantly, however, Dr. Bencheqroun believed that Benner was a candidate for a surgical procedure called a pulmonary thromboendarterectomy, a highly specialized, open-chest operation in which chronic blood clots are physically removed from the arteries in the lung. The world's leading experts in this procedure happened to be at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), and they agreed that Benner's case was operable.

"When you remove the obstacle, the blood can do its job, and the patient can regain her quality of life," explains Dr. Bencheqroun. "It also can extend her life."

Why had no one recommended this surgery before?

"People don't know much about CTEPH, therefore it goes unrecognized and untreated," Dr. Bencheqroun says. "But my message to Betty and others with this condition is, 'You don't have to live like this.' Of all the causes of pulmonary hypertension, CTEPH is the only reversible one. Something can be done about it. And here at Eisenhower, we keep abreast of the latest advances."

Mrs. Benner underwent the surgery at UCSD on May 7, 2012. Three days post-operation, she was off oxygen. After ten days, she was out of the hospital. Three months later, she took a Mediterranean cruise with her 20-year-old granddaughter. And when she returned, she and her husband took a 4,000-mile road trip throughout the West, visiting such high-altitude destinations as the Grand Tetons and Cascade Mountains.

"My husband had more trouble breathing at high elevations than I did!" smiles Benner. "I really do have a new lease on life."

"Betty has essentially been cured," notes Dr. Bencheqroun. "She just needs to stay on a blood thinner due to her inherited disorder, but she can go through the rest of her life naturally."

"There are no words to describe what I think of Dr. Bencheqroun and Eisenhower Medical Center," Benner says. "I applaud him and his commitment to make other doctors more aware of circumstances like mine."

"I want people to know about this condition and to ask their doctors about it," adds Dr. Bencheqroun. "If we put a face on surgery like this, I hope people will be less afraid, and know they can come out the other side even better."

