Enjoying Their Time in the Sun

Bill and Mary Barndollar continue to enjoy their time in the sun.

In the fall of 2006, Bill Barndollar woke up suddenly in the middle of the night. His heart was pounding, and at 74 years of age, he feared the worst — that he might be having a heart attack. He had never had any serious health problems, but he had been diagnosed with a coronary blockage, which had been treated with the placement of a stent. Bill knew better than to take any chances with his heart. At three o'clock in the morning, Bill woke Mary, his wife of more than 50 years. She immediately called the paramedics, and Bill was rushed to the Eisenhower Medical Center Emergency Department.

Once he had been examined, Bill and Mary were relieved to learn that he was not having a heart attack. Bill was suffering from atrial fibrillation, a disorder that causes an irregular heart rhythm in the atria, the two upper chambers of the heart. Symptoms vary, but Bill's palpitations were actually very typical of the disorder. The palpitations can be quite strong and frightening for some patients. Most importantly, however, atrial fibrillation patients have a significantly increased risk of stroke — more than seven times that of the general population. So while Bill may not have been having a heart attack, the diagnosis was a serious one. He had a condition that must be dealt with quickly, not just when the palpitations or other symptoms struck, but over the long term, to avoid a serious medical emergency.

But first, the doctors in emergency department needed to address Bill's immediate symptoms. When a patient with atrial fibrillation is treated in the Emergency Department, a procedure called cardioversion is often used in an attempt to resynchronize the patient's heart. A current of energy is delivered via patches applied to the patient's back and chest to establish a normal heart rhythm. But Bill's palpitations continued.

Although he was in an emergency department in the early hours of the morning, Bill had great faith in the Eisenhower cardiac team. *"When we chose a place to retire, I was looking for two things: good golf and good medical care,"* says Bill. *"I knew that Eisenhower Medical Center would provide that care. We love it here, we have everything we need, and anything we might want, including the best doctors anywhere. I knew that night, and with whatever was ahead, that I was in good hands."*

Bill and Mary first came to California from Ohio in 1958 when Bill realized that there was more opportunity for him in his field of financial services in the Golden State.

"California was the land of opportunity," Bill says. *"It was hard to leave our home, but Mary and I knew our future was here."* Living in Whittier, and eventually Claremont, the couple raised two daughters, and today have four grandchildren and one great-grandchild, all settled in Southern California. In 1998, forty years after Bill and Mary first moved to California, the Barndollars retired to Palm Desert.

Bill knew that if he was going to continue to fully enjoy his retirement, and more importantly, avoid more serious complications, addressing his condition of atrial fibrillation needed to be a priority. Following his early morning trip to the emergency room, Bill was scheduled for an appointment with Eisenhower cardiologist Ryszard Skulski, MD. Dr. Skulski confirmed the diagnosis of atrial fibrillation and prescribed a medication that is frequently used to treat the disorder.
"I don't experience the palpitations anymore and my quality of life has improved. I'm so happy to have my life back."

Over time, however, Bill was not entirely comfortable with the treatment. *"I continued to have episodes, and of course, it always happened at 3 o'clock in the morning,"* Bill laughs. *"It was very difficult to get a good night's sleep. Even if I didn't have an episode, I was worrying about having one. It was exhausting, and that really is no way to live."*

Bill was also worried about some of the medication's side effects, in particular, his increased sensitivity to sunlight. *"That might not sound like a big deal,"* Bill says with a smile. *"But if you play golf and you live in Palm Desert, you are going to want to spend time in the sun."*

Bill decided to explore other options and mentioned his interest in having a surgical intervention to Dr. Skulski. Skulski recommended Eisenhower's S. N. Mitruka, MD, a Board Certified cardiothoracic surgeon, who had an 80 percent success rate using a minimally invasive procedure to treat atrial fibrillation. Dr. Mitruka, with Cardiothoracic Surgeon Joseph Wilson, MD, had been only the third (and are still among only a few) heart surgeons in the United States to perform a minimally invasive thoracoscopic surgical maze procedure — a procedure that could improve Bill Barndollar's life.

Making only three small incisions, each about one half of one inch in length, the surgeon creates a maze-like pattern of lesions on the outside of the heart, resulting in scar tissue that prevents the impulses that cause atrial fibrillation. *"There are different types of maze procedures that we can do, depending on the specifics of the patient's condition,"* says Dr. Mitruka. *"The thoracoscopic maze is particularly effective for patients like Bill, who did not respond well to medication and did not have a heart condition that required open heart surgery. His condition was referred to as a "lone" atrial fibrillation."*

After meeting with Dr. Mitruka, Bill decided the thorascoscopic surgery was his best option. "I wanted to beat this, and get back to enjoying life," he says. On August 11, 2007, Bill had the surgery — and was home the next day. *"Even though the procedure had been described to me, everything was easier than I thought it would be,"* says Bill. *"The recovery was much easier than I expected. I had such a short hospital stay, and the incisions were very small. It was unbelievable how quickly they healed."*

And is Bill Barndollar awake at 3 a.m. these days? *"It has been a remarkable change,"* he enthuses. *"I don't experience the palpitations anymore and my quality of life has improved. I'm so happy to have my life back."*

For Bill, the success of the surgery in restoring normal sinus rhythm, or a normal heartbeat, has meant being able to once again enjoy the pleasures of the life he and Mary have built together in Palm Desert. He plays golf three days a week, and he and Mary are regulars at the McCallum Theatre. *"We love where we live,"* Bill says, *"because we have everything we could want right here."*

When Bill recalls the requirements he had for a retirement location, he thinks of the care he received at Eisenhower. *"I wanted Eisenhower nearby, and I'm so glad it is. I was fortunate to find Dr. Mitruka…he treated my atrial fibrillation and eliminated the need for medication."* For Bill, it means he and Mary can continue to enjoy their time in the sun.

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