

Heart Month Montrose Daily Press Column by Brad Huhta, MD, FACC

He was a fairly young man, fit and muscular, but was writhing in pain when he got to the ICU from the ER. He was having a large heart attack – it was the fall of 1985 and all we could do was dope him with Valium, Demerol, and Morphine. Then we watched through the long hours of the night as his heart slowly died.

I was a brand new intern on my first ICU rotation. I remember many of the patients who died back then, who wouldn't have died today. Another man in his 50s had severe blockages in the arteries of his heart but died while waiting for life saving surgery. My favorite uncle died on the operating table having bypass surgery.

Since 1985 there has been a revolution in cardiac treatment for many disorders, not just heart attacks. Pacemakers are a modern miracle: they can give life back to a person who otherwise would have spells of passing out or very poor energy from a slow heart rate. Medications with few side effects are available to lower cholesterol to prevent heart attacks, and to lower blood pressure to prevent strokes and kidney failure. There are incredible catheters, balloons and stents that allow us to look at the arteries of the heart and open blockages, including ones causing heart attacks. At Montrose Hospital we are routinely putting in pacemakers, doing heart catheterizations, and opening arteries with stents, procedures usually done at much larger medical centers.

But...these advances come with a price. The financial cost is astronomical and is eclipsing the ability of the average person to afford them. Health insurance is becoming increasingly expensive and covering less of the cost of medical care. Also, there is a dangerous lack of responsibility among many people for taking care of their own health – the cheapest and most effective insurance available. I've seen people think that getting a stent for a heart attack was so easy that they don't have to change their lifestyle. Another heart attack? No big deal, just pop down to the hospital and get another stent. High cholesterol?? Awww, eat what you want and take another Lipitor. Exercise?? If God meant me to exercise, He wouldn't have created television.

One third of all folks who have a heart attack die before getting to the hospital, and if you survive, but don't take your health seriously, there will be damage to the heart and other organs so that as you age you may feel so badly you wish you were dead. At some point, even without a heart attack, and even with the miracles of modern treatment, the body deteriorates beyond the ability of anything to fix it.

My wish for you is that you live in such a way that you never need a stent or to take drugs for cholesterol or blood pressure (spending time and money exercising is a lot more fun and cheaper than getting a stent). But if you need advanced cardiac care, my hope is that Montrose Hospital will continue to be available to help with the technology and clinical expertise right for you.

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