Lessons From Our Learners

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Feature Editor

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Saved by an Angel

Jerri Liu, MD

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Dear family and friends,

I don't know how to start. All I can say is—I am glad to be alive!

I was discharged from the hospital a few days ago. At one point, I was probably the youngest unstable patient in ICU. It was so terrifying that I was afraid to fall asleep.

Two weeks ago, I was having frequent palpitations and shortness of breath that I attributed to my tremendous work load and days of sleep deprivation. I had a history of cardiac arrhythmia 5 years ago during my residency, but it was not very severe, and I opted for medication treatment only. This time, I took my old medications without much relief. I decided to wait it out like before, hoping that my symptoms would resolve once I got some rest.

It was a warm Sunday afternoon and I was feeling faint, although I had just completed a short nap before driving home. On the freeway, I tried to make the drive home more tolerable by talking on my cell phone with my husband, who was right behind me in his car. All of a sudden, I felt my heart stop beating and I was waiting for that next beat, but it never came.

I said "Oh, my God!" and the taillights of the car in front of me faded. I heard a loud noise and then I opened my eyes; everything was blurry and dark in front of me. As I focused, I could make out the airbag in front of me, the pungent fumes from my car, and the steady hum of the windshield wipers. It was then I realized I had passed out and crashed.

When the paramedics and police came, I felt so lucky that no one else was hurt. I only sustained a few cuts and bruises on my face, hands, and knees although the car was completely totaled. I told the paramedics and police that I am a physician and I had history of heart problems. I promised them I would see my cardiologist the next day before my husband drove me home.

My doctor immediately set up a 24-hour Holter monitor. I had the same test done 5 years ago with nothing severe noted. However, this time I knew it was going to show something. My doctor had consulted with many different cardiologists. He felt it was best for me to be hospitalized due to the kind of tracing I had. It recorded PVCs, couplets, and most importantly, frequent runs of ventricular tachycardia (VT) up to seven or eight beats at rate of almost 300 bpm. With this result, it explained why I had felt so bad but not exactly why I passed out. I knew this time I had to find out what was going with my heart.

In the hospital, the nurses kept on saying "You are too young to have this problem!" at the same time sweating through my 10 beats of VT. I told the cardiologist that I should see the electrophysiologist (EP) soon. However, they could not avoid doing the basic workup, which included an echocardiogram and stress echo. Both turned out to be normal, as I expected.

Finally the electrophysiology study was done, but the result was not impressive. My EP could not induce any sustained VT or ventricular fibrillation (VF). He decided to put me on medications and scheduled me for a more extensive mapping study at a nearby larger hospital the following week. He gave me a choice of going home or staying in the hospital until the next week. I decided to stay because I still wasn't feeling better since I passed out.

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From the Facey Medical Group, Irvine, Calif.

My days on the telemetry floor were quite boring. I was able to watch some of my rhythms, like tracings of earthquakes, from the monitor station with the nurses. They were all surprised that I could feel every single one of the abnormal rhythms. I read books and played on the Playstation. Coworkers and friends from work came to cheer me up saying how lucky I was to have escaped from all the possible worse case scenarios of the car accident. I told them I must have a guardian angel watching over me.

On Friday night, I did not want to tell my nurse to change my broken IV heplock because I was such a hard stick. Somehow a little voice reminded me that without a good IV line I would not be able to receive medication quickly if I ever needed it. After a few attempts by the nurse, a new IV heplock was finally secured. At 12:30 am, I walked around the floor and sat next to the technician who was on that night to watch the monitors. He was wide awake, worried, and intense. He kept his eye on the monitor and said to me about how bad my rhythm was since his 7 pm shift.

I casually replied, "Don't worry. I've had worse rhythms for the past few days." He did not seem to lighten up. Instead, he answered, "Doc, you should go on to sleep, I never leave the monitor when I'm on." As I headed back to bed I felt reassured; I knew there were times when no one was in front of the monitor for awhile.

Opening my eyes, I felt that I had awakened from a sound night of sleep except there was a crowd of people surrounding my bed. I heard multiple voices—"Oh, you are an angel," "Wow, you are a trooper," and "You coded. We had to shock you four times." Then it dawned on me that I was on the brink of life and death, I had a cardiac arrest. I saw people coming in and out of my room drawing blood, putting in more IV lines, running an EKG. I started to doze off. But this time I would not allow myself because I was afraid of not waking up again.

I grabbed my nurse's hand so hard and begged her to talk to me or ask me questions to keep me awake. Being a physician, I knew how bad the situation was. I was trembling and so scared. I cried, "I don't want to die!" Concentrating on breathing in oxygen through the mask and keeping my eyes wide open, I was determined to stay alive. After a few minutes, I learned that I finally stayed in normal sinus rhythm with both IV medications. It was definitely a celebrating moment for the Code Blue Team but not for me; I was transferred to ICU.

At 4:30 am, both my EP and cardiologist showed up, not able to believe that I almost died. The EP told me, "Well, now we don't have a choice except for putting in an Automatic Implantable Cardioverter Defibrillator (AICD) next week." I remembered it was just a few days ago I was told I did not need one but now I wanted it to stay alive.

My incident was the hot topic for hospital staff that day. Nurses commented how lucky I was that I decided to stay in the hospital instead of going home. People asked if I had seen the "white light or tunnel." To everybody's disappointment, I told them I did not see anything, no angel, no heaven, no white light or tunnel. It was just like a deep sleep. I did not remember or feel the 15 minutes of chest compression or any of the four shocks. The ICU nurses kept on saying, "You are too young to go through this. We will watch you like a hawk today. Don't worry and get some rest." While in bed I watched my heart tracing on the monitor and noted that my ectopies had subsided with the lidocaine drip. I finally felt safe and was able to get a bit of rest.

The next few days, I had every test possible that you read about in a cardiology workup. Nothing explained why my heart went into the fatal VF.

Now 1 week after my AICD placement, my body is a battlefield covered with multiple punctured wounds in my groin, IV bruises on both arms, and two dark shapes on my chest. Every day I look in the mirror and see the two ugly burned skin marks from being shocked four times during the code. I remember a nurse stating, "I am glad to hear you complaining about the burned marks than not at all!"

I am now taking time off from work to recover and reflect about life after surviving two catastrophic events. There is always the question "why?" in my mind. I felt immensely fortunate to be given a second chance to live and to share this chapter of my life with you. I am so glad it's not the last chapter.

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Later I found out that all my episodes of passing out were due to idiopathic VFs. Retrospectively, I could have died several times, yet I did not. There were so many things that happened at the right time and right place for me to be alive today. Is this an act of higher power or merely a series of fortunate coincidences?

It is almost a year, with my first "re-birthday" coming up. At age 31, I thought my life was invincible, no limits and no boundaries. Death was never a thought crossing my mind. At age 32, I have learned that life can be fleeting, yet precious and wonderful. It is such a privilege to be alive. One should never take life for granted. I will definitely appreciate my life, cherish every bit of it, and enjoy every moment of it.

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