

## *Surviving my husband's triple heart bypass*



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When life throws us a curve, we have little choice but to focus, anticipate the upcoming obstacles, then run like wildfire. In baseball jargon, we long for a home run, while in life, we simply want to fix what is broken in our mix.

My family's most recent curve ball began during the circuit breaker when, like many others bound to the home, we focused inwards. Returning to the kitchen, I prepared healthy meals for my family and we all, including Happy, 17, and Bee, 12, exercised daily. As a result, and coupled with no travel, my husband Jim lost 10kg.

When he went for his physical, we all anticipated a positive, reaffirming health report. Although he is 77 years old, initial tests showed his weight was the same as it was in his late 30s, and he was just as fast on the treadmill as he was 40 years ago.

However, his exercise stress test, which mirrors how the heart works, displayed an "anomaly" in his heart. While a nurse assured Jim this was likely nothing, a CT scan a few days later indicated otherwise. The anomaly meant he had to undergo a coronary angiogram.

Once I entered the operating theatre post-angiogram, with my husband sombre, surely contemplating his fate, cardiologist Dr Stanley Chia showed me a video of Jim's blockage - 80 per cent in the main artery, as well as high blockage in another two spots. There was no denying this.

Our initial euphoria over Jim's excellent health turned to one of disbelief. How could he feel so good, exercising daily, eating well, with nary a symptom, while living with blockage that could result in a heart attack or stroke? Even death was a possibility, if either the heart muscle or brain were to be starved of blood flow for too long.

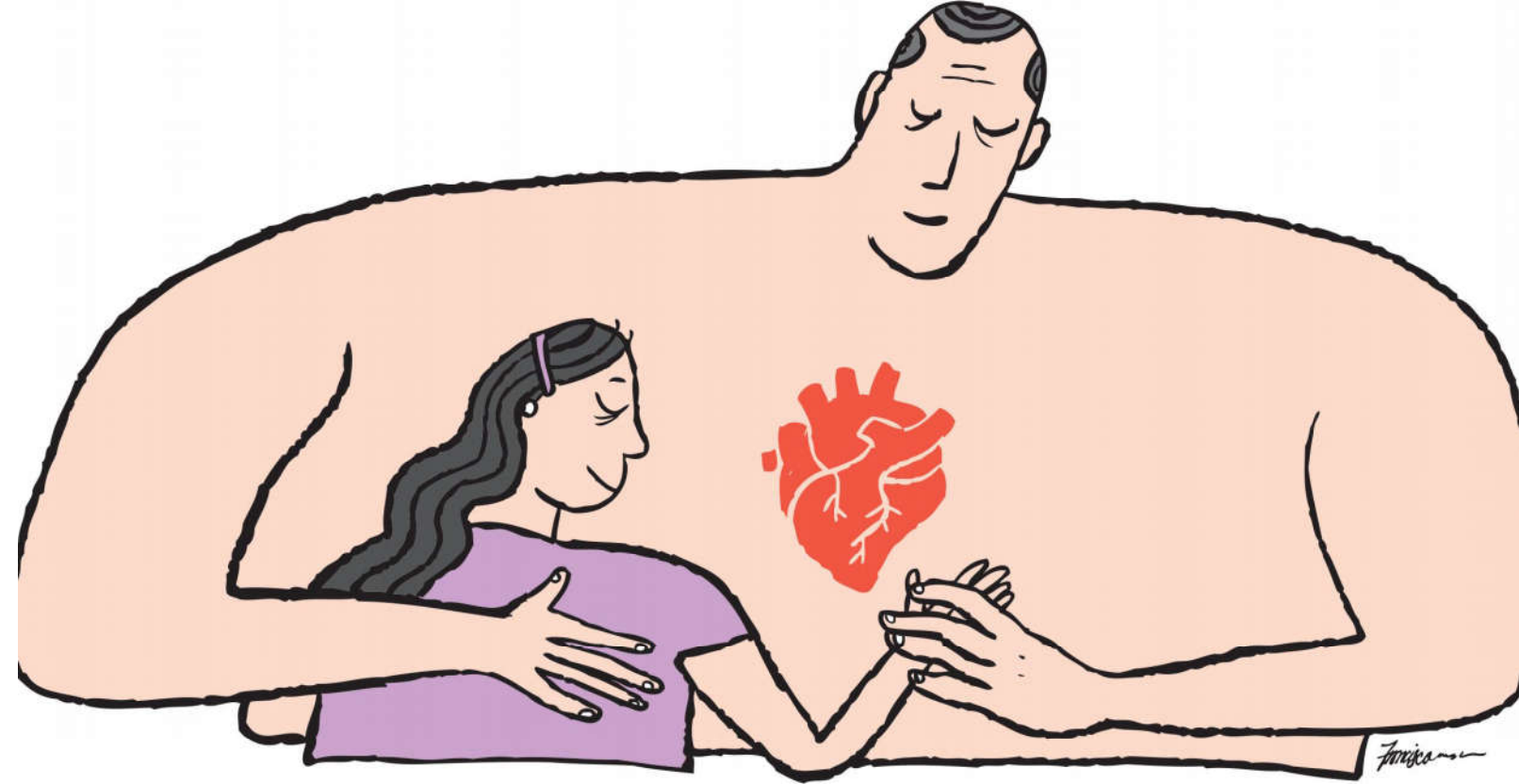
Over the next couple of days, we contemplated how to proceed: if traditional Chinese medicine might offer a solution, if there was any other option beyond bypass surgery. Once we knew the reality of the blockage, and the tragic possibilities for his future, all of us, especially Jim, were ready to arrange the procedure pronto.

Once the bypass operation was scheduled for four days away, lingering questions continued to jockey for space in my paranoid head: What if he had not gone for the physical? How long would he live without the bypass surgery? Were we making the right decision since there is a risk, from 1 to 3 per cent, of death during the operation? Would health insurance cover all of this extensive surgery and hospital stay?

Obviously, how Jim felt is what really mattered, but as his wife of 20 years, I felt an immense weight of the unknown. He could not die. Happy and Bee both needed him. Jim was my pillar: How to cope if I were to lose him? Unable to discuss the ordeal without tearing up, I remained outwardly strong for Jim and our daughters, while alone, I morphed into an uncertain, anxious ghost of myself.

Sharing the details with my closest friends, I appreciated the offers of support and help, but there was little they could do. While dealing with the uncertainty, I sought solitude. On the eve of the surgery, our labradoodle Bella, who sleeps with Happy, refused to leave Jim's and my bedroom. She knew.

On the dreaded morning, at 9.25am, two nurses paused before rolling Jim's stretcher into the operating area. As required with the present pandemic, I wore a mask and Jim's kiss did not touch the skin of my cheek. Seconds later, after a final squeeze of my hand, he was wheeled away. I instantly wondered if that incomplete kiss would ever be a regret.



In the end, the triple bypass surgery went like clockwork. His cardiothoracic surgeon, Dr Lim Chong Hee, opened Jim's chest cavity and grafted a new artery from his leg onto the heart, as a heart-lung machine kept his organs functioning. The operation, less than three hours long, succeeded in allowing blood to flow around the blockages.

"Jim was a superstar. He's already breathing on his own. Visit him in a few hours," Dr Lim shared, when we finally spoke in the early afternoon.

Instead, I rushed to visit Jim. Groggy, sallow, ashen and frail, he looked dreadful - an image I still cannot erase.

"He just had open-heart surgery!" my mother barked over the phone when I recounted this.

When Jim saw me, his voice faint and words slow, since the breathing tube had just been removed, he said, with a crooked smile: "Tell Bee she must do her oral exams."

At dinner the night before, he had shared lively banter with Bee, who decreed: "If the surgery doesn't go well, I will not have to do English and Chinese orals!"

Naturally, I laughed something silly, grateful for the successful surgery, and for Jim displaying a wee bit of his trademark wit so soon in the aftermath.

By the next morning, he looked more himself, while complaining of the loud night he had endured in the ICU. His surgeon Dr Lim, attentive, with plenty of reassuring WhatsApp updates over the seven-day hospital ordeal, and I shared a nervous laugh together as Jim was moved to the general ward.

"They don't know what's coming at them," Dr Lim whispered, with a chuckle.

All of this drama taught me that beyond my husband, in Singapore, heart disease and stroke are serious concerns. Seventeen people die from these every single day, according to the Singapore Heart Foundation, accounting for 29.2 per cent of all deaths last year. That means almost one in three die from heart disease or stroke.

According to the World Health Organisation, globally, cardiovascular diseases are the top cause of death, killing almost 18 million annually.

More men die suddenly from heart attacks than women, and half of men who die of heart attacks have no symptoms at all. Interestingly, heart disease kills about six times more women than breast cancer does, while females are more prone to experience symptoms of heart disease like shortness of breath, jaw pain, back pain, nausea and light-headedness versus the "classic" chest-pressure warning sign.

Too often, both males and females blame hard work or our stressful lives for causing the symptoms, not equating the pain to our overworked hearts. Thus, we fail to mention it to our doctors.

I have also learnt we can have a heart attack without even knowing it. Silent heart attacks, or silent myocardial infarctions, lack the intense symptoms - chest pain and pressure, extreme pain in the arm, neck or jaw, sweating or shortness of breath - of a "real" heart attack.

According to Harvard Medical School, 45 per cent of heart attacks are silent, found subsequently by an electrocardiogram. Scarring from a silent heart attack can trigger abnormal heart rhythms, another heart attack and even death during exercise. Some say what we do not know cannot hurt us, but that is obviously not the case here.

Keeping obesity, high blood pressure and high cholesterol in check plays a big part in keeping all of us heart-healthy. From 2010 to 2017, high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol rose from 14 per cent to 33 per cent among residents aged 18 to 69 locally. With our population ageing rapidly, this dangerous number will only increase.

Controlling the risks, through good diets, exercise and not smoking, does not mean we are above the fray, but if these are not well regulated, then the risks only climb higher. We are asking for a curve ball, or maybe worse.

I share this very personal story to encourage readers with a symptom perhaps connected to heart disease, or for those who have not had a check-up in forever, to please visit a doctor. Even if we think we are fit, as Jim did, the Ministry of Health's enhanced subsidies for Screen for Life should encourage more to go for regular health screenings at Community Health Assist Scheme general practitioner clinics.

Today, six weeks post-surgery, Jim is back in his groove, exercising, doing Zoom calls, eating healthily and savouring life. As I watch over him like a hawk, it drives him batty, but with my eye on the prize, I expect to have him around for a long time. Thankfully, with the detection of the blockage, and the resulting triple bypass surgery, he is going strong.

Every single one of us needs to treat our health as a genuine priority, living as we know we should, for ourselves - but also, for the sake of those who love us.

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