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50

“Extra” Years

by Jon Caswell

Imagine having 175 different doctors listen to your heart! That’s what happened to Doris Hookey before her heart surgery more than 50 years ago when she was only 32 years old. That’s a lot of stethoscopes, but her condition was so rare that her doctors wanted other doctors to learn from it.

“My husband was in the Navy, and I had gone to the Chelsea Naval Hospital in Boston for a checkup,” says Doris. She had traveled from her home in Warwick, Rhode Island. “The doctor told me that I had patent ductus arteriosus (PDA).”

The ductus arteriosus is a temporary fetal blood vessel that connects the aorta and the pulmonary artery before birth, while the fetus is developing in the uterus. Since oxygen and nutrients come from the placenta and the umbilical cord instead of the lungs, this blood vessel acts as a “short cut” that allows blood to bypass the deflated lungs and go straight out to the body. After birth, when the lungs are needed to add oxygen to the blood, the ductus arteriosus normally closes, ensuring that blood goes to the lungs to pick up oxygen before going out to the body. Normally this vessel closes at birth due to chemical changes and the presence of air in the lungs. If the ductus arteriosus closes correctly, the blood pumped from the heart goes to the lungs, back into the heart, and out to the body through the aorta carrying oxygenated blood.

In some infants, the ductus arteriosus remains open (or patent) and the resulting heart defect is known as patent ductus arteriosus. In most cases, a small PDA does not result in physical symptoms and will often heal itself over a few months. If the PDA is larger, health complications may occur. (Source: *Encyclopedia of Medicine*)

“The doctor was surprised and said he’d never seen PDA in anyone 32 years of age,” says Doris, who is an active member of Chapter 185 in Providence, RI. At that time, if the opening didn’t close within a few months, the babies died because there was no pediatric cardiac surgery. Today the problem is handled with medication, though it can be corrected with surgery if necessary.

“My condition was so rare they had two conferences so doctors could listen to my chest,” says Doris. “There were a hundred doctors at the first one and 75 at the second, and that put off surgery for three months. The Navy didn’t have any heart surgeons at that time, so a doctor from the Leahy Clinic did the surgery, but he did it in the Chelsea Naval Hospital in Boston.”

Today this would be a simple surgery, requiring only a small incision in the chest, but in 1956 it was much more complicated. “I was cut from backbone to chest bone with a rib removed so that they could get to the heart area,” says Doris. “I wasn’t allowed out of bed for ten days. Now patients are up and about in 24 hours!”

As far as her heart was concerned, that was that, as they say, except for losing her husband, Ernest, when she was only 39. They had had a son, Larry, against her doctor’s orders, and Doris devoted herself to raising him. She worked in the treasury department of what is now Bank of America and retired as a vice president. “Life went on very well for many years, then in 1990 I developed atrial fibrillation, which they controlled with medication until last year when I had a pacemaker put in. Since then I’ve gone into congestive heart failure.”

Doris joined MHI in 1990 and has been active in her chapter. Right now she is the treasurer and membership chairman as well as newsletter editor. “My greatest passion

is Mended Hearts. I talk about it at any opportunity. I’m always trying to build our chapter because it keeps shrinking. Heart patients are getting younger and younger, and they don’t seem to need the support. Unless you’re there that day at the hospital, I find it hard to connect with them. They feel like they’re back as good as they were before, and they’re not as interested in joining a group.”

Over the years Doris has had many opportunities to be a compassionate listener. “I’ve been able to help many women who have been widowed. Because I had been through it, I was able to guide them through the bad days.” Those times are among the most pleasing of many experiences in the “extra” 50 years the surgery gave her. “I was told I could have dropped dead at any moment; I really was living on borrowed time. I’m so glad to have had the opportunity to watch my son Larry grow into a fantastic man.

“I’ve had to slow down a lot because I’m tired all the time. I try to keep up with everything I’ve done all along, but 82 years will slow anybody down. I’m still active. I live alone and I drive. I volunteer at the hospital. I walk a lot there, and I have a two-story house so I’m up and down all day. I’m not a couch potato. I do a lot of reading and keep in contact with all my friends, particularly those who have health problems. I’m a good listener, which I learned in Mended Hearts, and that lifts their spirits.”

Doris’s advice for living a long life is simple, but emphatic: “Don’t smoke. I smoked for years. When I was in the hospital they brought an ashtray into my room and let me smoke in my room! Can you imagine? Everything has progressed so much in 50 years.

“And one more thing, everything in moderation, except smoking.” And celebrating 50 “extra” years. ❤️

Opposite page: Doris Hookey and son Larry, circa 1960

This page: Doris (seated, right) with friends Margaret Macnie and Betsy Butler on an Alaskan cruise; Doris at home, far right

