Lexington psychiatrist found the heart care he needed close to home

Dr. Charles Shelton knew there was a history of cardiovascular disease in his family. Combine that with his osteopathic training as a psychiatrist, and it’s no surprise he maintained a healthy diet and exercised regularly.

But in the spring of 2011, Charles felt something wasn’t right.

“I was able to swim 1.2 miles two or three times a week,” he said. “But when I walked rapidly or went up stairs, I would feel short of breath. It threw me off in trying to figure out what was going on.”

In May 2011, Charles underwent an unrelated elective surgery. During his recovery, he went into complete heart block – where the heart’s electrical system short circuits. He sought medical care and originally was diagnosed with a rare genetic condition of the heart.

By coincidence, a patient in his Lexington psychiatry practice had received the same diagnosis. She encouraged him to seek a second opinion with doctors who specialized in the condition at The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.

There, doctors suspected Charles instead had cardiac sarcoidosis, a condition that causes tiny clumps of cells to grow on the heart. It ultimately led to heart failure.

Choosing UK HealthCare

Then 49 years old, the husband and father of two teenage boys would need a heart transplant. He returned

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to Kentucky and researched the only two facilities in the Commonwealth that perform heart transplants and scheduled an appointment with John C. Gurley, MD, a UK Gill Heart Institute cardiologist who also cared for Charles’ mother-in-law.

Gurley immediately consulted with Navin Rajagopalan, MD, UK’s medical director of cardiac transplant.

“I was impressed by the staff of cardiologists and the treatment team at the Gill Heart Institute,” Charles said. “They have the ability to perform procedures and to do things that only the top institutes in the country are doing.”

Charles was admitted to UK Albert B. Chandler Hospital on Nov. 18, 2011. He stayed there for more than a month, celebrating his 50th birthday in early December on the Gill Heart sixth floor inpatient unit.

On the morning of Dec. 26, 2011, Charles Hoopes, MD, director of the UK heart and lung transplant program, notified him a donor heart was available. By 2:30 that afternoon, Charles was in surgery. Dr. Hoopes performed the four-hour procedure to give Charles his new heart. When Charles woke up and the tube placed in surgery was removed from his throat, he took a deep breath.

“It was amazing to have that feeling, just being able to breathe in,” he said. “I knew I had this new heart. It was a sensation I’ll never forget.”

Rehab helped transition back to daily life

The doctors and nurses on the UK transplant team say his recovery has been remarkable.

“Dr. Shelton has done exceptionally well since his transplant,” cardiologist Rajagopalan said. “He has done a great job taking care of his donor heart, which will hopefully allow him years of excellent health.”

Charles’ recovery included cardiac rehabilitation, an outpatient program that reduces the risk of post-surgery complications and focuses on returning heart patients to a normal life.

“Cardiac rehab is a place to regain an active life with the safety and support of a cardiac care team,” said Alison Bailey, MD, director of the cardiac rehab program at the Gill Heart Institute. “Our nurses, exercise physiologist, dietitians and physicians work together to ensure each patient learns about optimal cardiovascular health while regaining their strength and independence in a safe, monitored environment.”

Charles maintained a positive attitude throughout the whole process. He only spent nine days in the hospital following the transplant surgery. And on the day he was released, he took time to speak to the heart transplant support group at UK, offering his expertise as a psychiatrist to discuss seasonal affective disorder with the support group’s members.

Looking ahead

Since receiving a new heart, Charles said he feels like he has his life back. And he’s using his second chance to help others along the way. He frequently meets with patients at UK who are just beginning the transplant process to share his story and his optimism. And he has even provided feedback to the transplant team about psychological issues that go along with receiving a transplant.

Charles maintains a healthy diet and exercises as much as he can. He’s looking forward to spending as much time as he can with his wife, Amy, and his sons.

“I’ve got to take care of this gift I’ve been given,” he said. “I’m going to do all I can to make this heart last.”

A year after his transplant surgery, his annual evaluation – which included a right and left heart catheter, an endomyocardial biopsy, an echocardiogram and a chest X-ray – all came back perfect.

The picture of health

“It’s unbelievable what medical technology and what a medical team and an institution can do,” he said. “I would not go anywhere else. I’m a living example of what can be done at UK and the Gill Heart Institute.”

For information on the UK Gill Heart Institute, call 800-333-8874 or 859-257-1000
You may also visit our website at ukhealthcare.uky.edu/gillheart.