

Stroke of Fate

Stroke can occur when least expected; know the symptoms

By Ernst Lamothe Jr.

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Physician Peter Godfrey: "It all happened so quickly, and I didn't have any indication that it was a stroke," he said of the stroke he had May 12. His wife Sharon said he was lucky that they called 9-1-1 and the ambulance showed up promptly.

It was a normal day for Lee Iannone.

Suddenly, it wasn't.

He woke up in the morning a few months ago and got ready for work like he had done plenty of times before. While walking through the living room, he noticed he couldn't really pick up one of his feet. He was dragging it along the ground and his first thought was, "OK that's weird." He figured his foot fell asleep.

Next, he tried to brush his teeth, but his arms couldn't move. Iannone had to shake his head side-to-side to get the job done. Still, he thought nothing of it.

"I just giggled and said what a hell of a morning I am having," said Iannone, 57, of Webster.

He sat on the couch and watched ESPN SportsCenter for a little while trying to get dressed. Once again, he was having difficulty doing something simple— just putting on his clothes — and he couldn't really bring the comb down to his hair.

"I woke up my wife and told her something is wrong. I just kept thinking that this is such a strange morning, what in the world is happening?" asked Iannone.

What was happening to Iannone was a stroke. That started a multiple-week stint at Rochester General Hospital, which started in late March. A stroke happens when blood flow to a part of the brain stops.

"Stroke is an extremely time-sensitive disease. You have two million brain cells that die in minutes and it can be profoundly debilitating," said Bryan Gargano, who specializes in emergency medicine for Rochester General Health System. "So many people end up not paying attention to symptoms and letting hours pass that can be the difference between life and death. Just like a heart attack cuts off flow to the brain, strokes are equally serious. The problem is a lot of people don't even realize they are having a stroke."

That was the case for Iannone. But once time had passed and he realized something was wrong, he didn't even

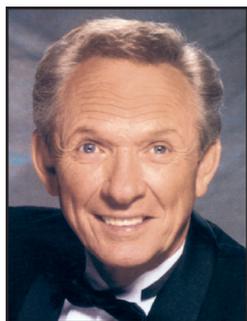
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wait for an ambulance. He drove the 15 minutes to the hospital and medical officials put him in a wheelchair. He was diagnosed with having two separate strokes — one involving his brain stem and the other on the left side of his brain.

"I had no idea I was having a stroke. It all happened so fast," said Iannone.

Ironically, "FAST" is the acronym for signs of a stroke. F is for face when one side of a person's face droops or is numb. A is for arm when a person's arm feels weak or drifts downward when raised. S is for speech when a person has trouble speaking or repeating short sentences. T is for time meaning if any of these signs are present, call 9-1-1 immediately.

Don't ignore symptoms

Gargano said Iannone's reaction that morning is unfortunately normal. He has heard many stories where people simply shake off the weirdness of the symptoms and keep moving forward until they collapse.

"It's amazing sometimes how people will just say I can't feel the right side of my body and will just ignore it. Or even worse, they decide that what they need is to take a nap and then they will feel better," said Gargano. "Those hours of napping are brain cells dying and there is not too much that can be done if you let four to five hours just pass by."

While strokes often come out of the blue, Gargano notices many patients do come with pre-existing conditions such as diabetes and high cholesterol.

Physician Peter Godfrey said stroke can happen to anyone and being part of the medical profession doesn't make one immune or give a person an indication of what may be happening. Other than bypass surgery and hip issues, he was in good health. Then one day after dinner while sitting quietly, he immediately felt a sensation of needing to lie down.

"I felt if I didn't I was just going



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to fall over," said Godfrey, 67, a former internal medicine physician at Olean General Hospital in Olean. "For the next 20 minutes, I was on the floor sick to my stomach and vomiting."

His wife, Sharon, quickly called 9-1-1 and they went to the emergency room, where he continued to be sick for hours. He was given fluids and a CT scan.

After visiting with a neurologist, it was revealed that he had issues in his right cerebellum along with the left side of his brain.

"It all happened so quickly, and I didn't have any indication that it was a stroke. I consciously knew my surroundings, but I didn't have some of the obvious symptoms

that occur when you have a stroke," said Godfrey of Olean, who now does contract work in occupational medicine.

Either way, one of the best things that occurred was Sharon Godfrey calling the emergency number without hesitation, especially since that was the sickest she had ever seen him.

"It was all hectic and a little confusing because even as he was feeling horrible, he was still taking his pulse while he was throwing up," she said. "It was frightening because it was unexpected. I am so glad the ambulance came within 15 minutes. One thing I know at our age, in the back of your mind you always think it could be more serious. I'm thankful everything worked out well."

For Iannone, he is on his way to recovery and what made the long hospital stay manageable was the RGH nurses and others who helped him recover from the stroke, which included physical therapy.

"They told me I need to have patience since I sometimes want to get right back to where I was before," said Iannone.

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