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The Beat- Episode 1 Transcript

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Dr. Poon [00:00:10] This is actually one condition where skipping doses of drugs can land you in a hospital.

Dr. Joza [00:00:15] My message to patients with heart failure is not to give up hope.

Caroline [00:00:23] Chances are you or someone you know has been personally affected by heart disease and stroke. They can devastate lives, sometimes suddenly, but there's hope. I'm Caroline Lavallée and you're listening to The Beat, a podcast by Heart & Stroke with support from our generous donors. In each episode, we're joined by Canada's leading physicians and experts to discuss the most pressing issues related to heart and brain health, and you'll be inspired by the real stories from people living with heart disease and stroke. Thanks for listening. Now let's get into the episode. What is heart failure? It's a question that many may not know the answer to. And that's understandable because it can be confusing. You see, heart failure is a condition, not an event. Heart failure is a diagnosis that means your heart is not functioning as it should or there is a problem with its structure. Heart failure can progress day after day, week after week and year after year, your heart gets weaker and weaker.

Kevin [00:01:41] It got pretty scary, pretty fast. Kaboom! Like a bomb dropped on me. Heart's operating roughly at around 29 percent lower muscle, which causes heart failure.

Caroline [00:01:56] So what does that mean for those living with heart failure, and the doctors and researchers trying to save them? That's what we're here to find out. Let's start with some alarming facts. Each year, 100,000 Canadians are diagnosed with heart failure and there is no cure. But the medical community is racing to find answers that will prolong life and give people more quality time with the people they love.

Dr. Poon [00:02:25] We need to work as a team and patients and caregivers are an important part of that team. It's the only way we're going to succeed.

Caroline [00:02:34] First things first. What exactly is heart failure? We asked Dr. Stephanie Poon to explain. Dr Poon is the medical director of the Heart Function Clinic and a cardiologist at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Center. She is also assistant professor at the University of Toronto.

Dr. Poon [00:02:56] So heart failure is a chronic condition that is caused by the heart's not being able to function as it should, and this can happen if the heart is too weak. But sometimes it can also happen if the heart is strong but too stiff and unable to fill properly with blood. And this can then lead to fluid backing up into the lungs, causing shortness of breath, as well as swelling in the legs and abdomen. And a lot of people with heart failure also feel very fatigued and may have a bit of a cough as well. The most common cause of heart failure in North America is coronary artery disease, namely blockages in the heart arteries or heart attacks. Other common causes of heart failure include things like high blood pressure, diabetes, problems in the heart valves — either they're too weak or too tight — heart rhythm problems, anemia, kidney disease, substance abuse such as alcohol or drugs, infections, or even conditions where abnormal proteins or other substances can infiltrate the heart muscle. So, because there's such a wide range of things that can cause heart failure, we see many different types of people in our clinic who have heart failure, ranging from patients who are in their 30s and 40s. And despite their young age, some of these young people have actually even had heart attacks. However, the majority of our people are a little bit older than this.

Caroline [00:04:23] Now, COVID 19 has damaged previously healthy hearts and disrupted health care services, resulting in people with heart conditions or stroke ending up sicker. This could mean we will see even more people with heart failure in the years to come. So how do you recognize heart failure? Here's Dr. Poon again.

Dr. Poon [00:04:46] Some of the signs and symptoms associated with heart failure include water backing up into the lungs, so people then feel short of breath, and a cough. People with heart failure may also experience swelling in their legs and abdomen. And because of that, sometimes their appetite is affected and oftentimes they feel tired.

Caroline [00:05:11] Heart failure affects a staggering number of patients seen by Dr. Jacqueline Joza. She's an assistant professor of medicine at McGill University and a cardiac electrophysiologist, which means she focuses on disorders of the heart's electrical system.

Dr. Joza [00:05:28] When patients come to me with an electrical problem that's causing heart failure, they're usually presenting with symptoms of shortness of breath, of inability to perform their usual activities, feeling like they're drowning. These are really the years of their life that they would like to enjoy with their grandchildren and their children. And so those are the main presenting symptoms. And when we see that, what we're looking to help them with is improve their quality of life and particularly in elderly patients, they're particularly looking for more quality of life in addition to a prolongation of their life. So, this is something that we can actually help them with, which is really gratifying.

Kevin [00:06:51] Let's go back about 10, 12 years ago. Nice, sunny day in August. Walking my dog Cassius, great dog, cross with border collie, always fun. I probably got about 50, 60 meters away from my house and I just started sweating a lot. I looked down at my foot and — I wear flip-flops in summer — it's about the size of... almost the size of an orange growing into a grapefruit, and felt my heart really started escalating beats. So getting faster and faster.

Caroline [00:07:31] Kevin called a friend, and 20 minutes later, he was in the emergency department. He was thrown headfirst into a new world of doctors tests and painful symptoms he had never experienced before. In an instant, Kevin's life had changed forever.

Kevin [00:07:53] So when I got to the hospital, I was trying to be a tough guy. I didn't want to show my emotions. They brought me right to emergency, but an hour and a half later I said, Oh, I feel a lot better. Can I go home? They said, you're not going home, you're not going anywhere. You're on the verge of probably having a heart attack or you're having stroke. So I had no idea what was going on. Nobody was telling me anything just because I don't think they wanted to agitate me. I don't think they wanted to get my heart rate back up. It's not like they're coming up and said, Hey, you know what, buddy, you're going to have a, I never heard the word heart failure. I never heard anything. I'm going to be staying here for a while. They told me contact your family. We got the MRI. They took a front view, back view, side view all these different views of my heart. Doctor took a look at that and said, you have blockage in one of your arteries. Pretty severe.

Caroline [00:08:44] To open up Kevin's blocked artery, doctors implanted a small tube called a stent inside his artery. It may have saved them from a heart attack. His emotions were all over the place. That's when he learned that his heart was already damaged. Doctors told him he had heart failure.

Kevin [00:09:07] When I first heard the word heart failure, what is that? And I remember when I first heard it, they said they want to admit me to a heart failure clinic. Who, what, when, where and how is a heart failure clinic and where is this place? I've never heard of it before. They said oh it's a division of Sunnybrook. We're going to get you in this. We want you to go a couple of times a week right now in the beginning. Simple exercises, walk around, walk around a regular track, lift some little weights. A lot of it's just, you know, nothing strenuous. Go on a bike. Let's do your vox rate. Let's see how strong your heart is and everything. That's recorded in this clinic. The thing about the clinic is that the heart failure clinic is you start meeting other people who went through the same thing you are. All different ages, all different races, kind of share their stories with them, talk to them. Then I met a lady actually who changed my life. That's Dr. Stephanie Poon. Let's start going to the heart clinic once a month to meet with her and once a week to the actual clinic. So that point there I started to understand what heart failure when we started doing a lot of research about it.

Caroline [00:10:20] Thanks to Kevin's hard work, his new medication and the support of his family, friends, Dr. Poon and the rest of his healthcare team, he was able to manage his heart failure symptoms and keep up favourite activities like golf and cycling. For the next several years, you likely wouldn't know Kevin had heart failure. But like others living with heart failure, things took a turn for the worse. And that turn happened in April 2021 during the COVID 19 pandemic. The news from his health care team came as a surprise.

Kevin [00:10:59] They said, Hey. You know, monthly check ins, go to the heart clinic, something severely is wrong. Don't want to alarm you, but the heart muscle is gone. It's increasing, but it's actually decreasing; the muscle is going back to where it was. So we got to get you in there to do some tests. The good thing about that, besides me mentally breaking down inside, is, if I wasn't going to the heart clinic and seeing Dr. Poon every month, they wouldn't have caught this. I wasn't showing any symptoms. You're looking at the same guy that you're looking at right now, talking to. I wouldn't have even known. It got pretty scary, pretty fast. How I really felt. Kaboom, like a bomb dropped on me. They do all the tests. They told me, you know what like it's before. Heart's operating roughly at around 29 percent lower muscle, which causes heart failure. We had to figure out what's going on. MRIs, numerous tests, X-rays. They actually inject a dye into your heart. See, when they pull it up on the X-ray, they could see the blockages. And they just said three arteries are blocked The stent that you had is not working anymore and the heart valve on your aorta is leaking. You got to do valve replacement. I said, OK, so what's the other option? Well, the other option is you carry on. Don't do nothing. And the chances are you'll probably go into cardiac arrest very soon. Could be a month, could be two months, could be a week. You had three of your arteries are blocked, 70, 90 percent and your heart valve on your aorta is bleeding. So you've got a choice A, choice B. Obviously, we go with B. Let's do the surgery.

Caroline [00:12:54] Kevin said that things got pretty scary, pretty fast, and that's to be expected because he was facing triple bypass and heart valve replacement surgery, all during a global pandemic. Surgery gave Kevin the chance to live the life he wants, and it also gave him perspective — despite knowing that his journey with heart failure would continue for the rest of his life. As anyone who has experienced heart failure will know, it's an emotional battle just as much as a physical one. Many patients will face anxiety and depression as a result of their condition.

Kevin [00:13:39] You go through something like this. You know, the surgery I had was almost about eight hours. I went in at nine o'clock in the morning. I didn't wake up the next day until 10:00 a.m. I lost a whole day. I thought I was invincible. This thing, it was a gut check. It was a reality check. You realize how precious life is.

Caroline [00:14:03] Kevin has gone through a lot because of heart failure. But what about people who may be at risk of heart failure in the future or who have just been diagnosed? Are there things they can do to reduce their risk or manage their symptoms? Here's Dr. Poon again.

Dr. Poon [00:14:24] So heart failure prevention is, I think, pretty straightforward what I would tell most patients in order to try and prevent heart failure in the future, try to lead a healthy lifestyle right from the start, which means eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly and not smoking. Go to see your family physician regularly so that you can make sure your blood pressure, cholesterol and sugar levels stay normal. Because if you develop high blood pressure, high cholesterol or diabetes, the sooner that you treat these things, the better you'll be able to prevent heart failure from happening to you down the road. The treatment of heart failure involves not only medications, but also huge lifestyle changes, which will require education from physicians and healthcare providers, as well as support from loved ones, for patients to be successful. So physicians and health care providers need to teach patients and their caregivers about the importance of taking medications every single day. This is actually one condition where skipping doses of drugs can land you in a hospital. Also, it is important to teach patients the importance of lifestyle changes, such as fluid and sodium restrictions. And importantly, patients should also be taught to weigh themselves every morning so that they can recognize when they are retaining fluid and then take extra water pills to fix the problem instead of letting the water build up in their bodies and forcing them to come to hospital. There was a quote that I heard from a colleague of mine, Dr. Anique Ducharme from the Montreal Heart Institute. She says, we need to work as a team and patients are caregivers are an important part of that team. It's the only way we're going to succeed.

Caroline [00:16:09] Collaboration and education will be two major pieces of the puzzle when it comes to overcoming heart failure once and for all. The other secret ingredient may be hope. Kevin wants to remind people with heart failure that they're never alone. There is support available.

Kevin [00:16:33] First of all, don't be afraid. You're not going to be the first one and you're not the last one. There are a lot of a lot of people out there who are here to help you. And what I mean by that is, there's doctors, there's specialists, there's nurses — I love to thank the front-line staff at Sunnybrook Hospital. I don't think I really understood what front-line people did. And these people are watching you. They're like, you're twenty four by seven guardian angels. Always there. So big shout out to them. But what I like to tell people is look for the symptoms. If you be proactive and I'm not saying be like me. But if your uncle, grandfather or whoever in your family has heart issues, tell that to your family doctor. If you find you're breathing heavily after any type of cardiovascular activities, tell your doctor. If your diet consists of a lot of fried foods and you know, high sugar things, just pick those in moderation. And just get checked out. Tell your doctor, Hey, this is my diet, or maybe looking at switching it up. But just know that you're not alone and try to be proactive versus reactive. And just know your body your body's... you only got one shot at this, and I'm really lucky.

Caroline [00:17:53] Dr. Joza wishes that more people with heart failure could share this outlook because ultimately a diagnosis of heart failure does not have to be a death sentence.

Dr. Joza [00:18:05] Many people associate heart failure with a dead end, lack of hope, mortality or certain death. Heart failure is not that at all. In fact, there's many new therapeutics, there's many medications, there's many different procedures and devices that have been developed over the last five to 10 years that have really improved the outcomes of heart failure patients. We have made remarkable steps forward, and I think that there is a lot of hope. My message to patients with heart failure is not to give up hope. There's always an avenue to improve symptoms.

Caroline [00:18:46] Looking ahead to the future, Kevin feels immense gratitude to have been given another chance at life and thankfully the amazing developments of modern medicine are only just beginning. Like Dr. Joza, Dr. Poon also sees tremendous advances in heart failure treatment.

Dr. Poon [00:19:07] These past few years have been an exciting time for all of us who specialize in heart failure because there have been so many discoveries made of new medications which have been shown in clinical trials to help people with heart failure live longer and prevent heart failure hospitalizations. And these medications target different biochemical and hormonal pathways, which result in heart failure. So we're able to work synergistically together to improve outcomes for patients with heart failure. And there have also been research studies on how to improve access to care as well, for patients living with heart failure. Because, as you know, Canada is a very big country, and sometimes the care that we receive across provinces in different areas of our country may not be able to easily access specialists or advanced imaging or technologies. So there is research being done nowadays to facilitate access to care, either through virtual technologies or virtual care modeling, which is also very exciting.

Caroline [00:20:13] As the medical community works together to find a solution to heart failure and other potentially fatal conditions, Heart & Stroke is working with leading organizations, experts and people living with heart failure in Canada to drive a new action plan. The goal is to better integrate diagnosis, care and treatment to ensure that anyone with heart failure has access to the right care at the right time and gets the support they need.

Dr. Poon [00:20:47] Well, I think that everyone who takes care of heart failure patients has to help spread the word, not just cardiologists, but also family doctors, internal medicine specialists, emergency room doctors, nurse practitioners, pharmacists, etcetera. It really will take the whole village to help and solve this problem. I think the key to raising awareness is just taking that extra time to teach people about heart failure.

And this can be done one patient and family at a time when you're taking care of them, or if you have the opportunity, you can help to raise public awareness on a larger level by reaching out to different groups of people like we're doing here today. And, of course, organizations like the Heart and Stroke Foundation, Canadian Cardiovascular Society, Canadian Heart Failure Society and HeartLife Foundation, to name a few, are definitely really important and can help us to achieve this goal by enabling us to build the networks that we need to identify care gaps, but also to help us make things better and spread the word.

Caroline [00:21:54] Thank you, Dr. Poon and Dr. Joza, for offering your expertise. And thank you, Kevin, for sharing your inspiring story. If you'd like to learn more about heart failure and how we're fighting it on all fronts, go to heartandstroke.ca. I hope you enjoyed this episode. In upcoming episodes we'll cover such topics as women's cardiovascular health, cardiac arrest and the mental health aspects of heart disease and stroke — all with the aim of helping to arm you with knowledge and hope, the best tools we have to beat heart disease and stroke. Thanks for listening to The Beat and a special thanks to our donors for making this podcast possible. Subscribe now to stay informed, get inspired and rediscover hope. Don't forget to rate and review the podcast so we can reach even more listeners. Stay tuned for our next episode. Until next time, I'm Caroline La-vallée.

The End

