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THE AMAZING HEART

I'm continually fascinated by how complex and elegant an organ the human heart is and how much can happen to disrupt its healthy workings: the rhythms, the flow, the arterial passageways and valves. We are affected by our genetics, our behaviors and habits and even how we handle stress in our lives in such ways that can literally make the difference between a life lived healthfully and a life cut short. Coronary heart disease is the leading cause of death in America today, so there is no way that I am going to underestimate the daunting complexity of disease in patients that I treat every day. However, I am going to discuss some of the advances we've made over the past thirty years to fight cardiovascular disease, and inroads that have been made.

Cardiology looked very different when I was a young doctor in the seventies than it does now. We just didn't have as many tools as we do today and it was not uncommon to lose patients to heart attack or strokes in the days before angioplasty, TPA and chest pain clinics. Smoking was much more widespread, and the medications we had to use were not as varied or effective as the ones we have today. Thankfully, the past thirty years have seen incredible advances – revolutionary changes in the way we diagnose, treat and manage cardiovascular disease.

One of the major factors toward the increasing longevity of our population in this country is our ability to fight heart disease. Through technological breakthroughs and improved understanding of cardiac disease, doctors are much better able to choose from a slew of treatments, and respond much quicker than ever before. I have patients who had bypass surgeries more than 25 years ago who are living healthy lives today with the benefit of medication, lifestyle changes and vigilance. We know by now that angioplasty procedures with stents can be useful and life-saving, not only in the coronary arteries but also in the peripheral arteries. Over the years, the length of recovery time from bypass surgery has shortened. The fact is that interventional cardiology can work in concert with bypass to keep arteries open and possibly avoid multiple surgeries. This is something we now do regularly that even ten years ago would have been an anomaly.

It's a joy to see that we can perform limb salvage on a diabetic patient who may have otherwise lost his foot completely. It's a joy to see that we can avert a stroke by placing a stent in the carotid artery. It's gratifying when a patient comes in and we find a medication that can get his blood pressure to a normal range so he's able to resume an active life and just feel better. When we can detect an arrhythmia and treat it with a pacemaker or other advanced electrophysiological treatments, we can help a person live longer and improve his or her quality of life. Every case is different, and not every crisis can be averted; I'm thankful to have a great clinical team to work with and knowledgeable colleagues to confer with in this unique medical community.

Prevention is another key to longer, healthier lives, and though we are always trying to help our patients learn more about their health, many patients now do a lot of research on their own. People are savvier than even a few years ago. For example, they are more informed about what symptoms signal a heart attack, what their cholesterol count should look like, how much to exercise in order to maintain healthy weight and a myriad other facts that people mostly didn't know until a crisis arose. In my experience, people have more opportunities to knowingly listen to their bodies than ever, and if something seems out of the norm, they can check it out. This can lead to fitter bodies, longer lives that are lived with meaning and activity and generally more satisfaction.

In my practice, I have been very fortunate to work with the heart. The heart is symbolically and literally the hub of the body, the radial point for the byways internally. The more we learn about this fascinating organ and its affect on every other system, the more interconnected and meaningful my work is every day, and the greater chance we all have of living our lives with heart in mind.

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