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MEDICATED STENTS

I've had the privilege of being involved with balloon angioplasty from its inception in the late 1970s, and have been working with an array of technological advancements that have developed since then. Cardiovascular medicine is a fascinating, dynamic field, and every day I'm honored to be a part of my patients' lives.

One of the most exciting and life-saving technologies in medicine today is the drug-eluting stent, or, medicated stent. The stent is now a mainstay of cardiovascular treatment, as it has various ways of helping cardiologists keep patients' arteries open.

When a patient comes in with a clogged artery or an acute cardiac event, doctors have several alternatives for treatment. Balloon angioplasty with a stent is one of those options. In this instance, a tiny wire is inserted into the groin and guided up into the clogged artery. A small balloon is attached to the wire and wedged inside the blockage. At this point, the balloon is inflated, opening the artery and allowing blood to flow through freely once again.

A stent is a miniscule metal mesh scaffold of sorts that acts as a stabilizing structure to help keep the arterial walls open. So, when the wire and balloon are removed, the stent remains inside the vessel, buffering the walls.

Over recent years, medicated stents (stents that release a drug that aids in prevention of restenosis, or, re-hardening of the artery) have proven more effective in treating cardiovascular disease than a bare-metal stent alone. Balloon angioplasty alone has a 40% recurrence of blockage; bare metal stent sees about a 25% recurrence rate. A medicated stent, however, sees only about a 4.5% recurrence rate. The advantages are stunning.

Also, stents reduce the risk of the vessel closing down during the procedure, and the risk of a procedure using any kind of stent is down to less than one-half percent. Higher risk patients, like those who have diabetes, reduce their risk even more with a medicated stent. The downside of utilizing the medicated stent is that the patient must stay on anti-platelet medications forever. On the horizon, however, new stents are being developed that dissolve in a few months, and may require no blood thinners, or less intensive treatment.

Stents are also becoming utilized in treatment of disease in peripheral arteries, including the carotid arteries. These carotid stent procedures have successfully combated strokes in patients at risk.

Balloon angioplasty with a stent is a non-invasive procedure. Many people who have this procedure leave the hospital within 24 hours and are able to go right back into their daily routine. Stents are increasingly used to help keep bypass grafts open as well, so that after even very invasive surgeries, there are non-invasive options to help augment the graft treatment.

As a cardiologist who has been on the front lines of cardiovascular technology since the beginning of balloon angioplasty, my strong feeling is that medicated stents have been one of the major achievements in medicine in the past 100 years.

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