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A Close Call – Donald Halke III, MS-III

An Interview and Narrative written by Justin Guthier, MS-III

Saturday nights for me usually mean quality time with my fiancé. She has been living in Pittsburgh for the past 2 years completing her Master's degree in Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh. I travel out to see her occasionally and we spend time together watching movies and going out for dinner. October 24th was no different than usual. As I was coming out of the movies with my fiancé, I turned my cell phone back on and found a voicemail from my Mom – it was 10:00 pm. I casually listened to the message as I started to get into the car when, I nearly dropped the phone from my hand. My ears heard but my mind could not process – “Donnie, you need to come home, your Dad is having a heart attack.”

The night before, my father and mother had gone out for a bite to eat. They had just finished eating some Maryland crab soup together when my father felt like he had heartburn. This was not an unusual occurrence for him since he does get heartburn from time to time. He took some Tums and aspirin when he got home, hoping it would go away. The pain increased in intensity throughout the evening. Thinking it was simply the heartburn, my Dad decided to sleep it off. Indeed, it did improve and by next morning he was feeling better. My Dad continued his normal routine that Saturday, doing work around the farm, plumbing and splitting wood. In the evening hours, the pain had returned and again increased in intensity, worse than before. At one point, my Dad was walking up a hill on our farm when suddenly he felt as if a 200 pound weight had been placed upon his chest. He could not move – he knew something was wrong.

My Mother took my father to the hospital where they did an EKG. The EKG yielded disheartening results – there was ST elevation, yet it was minor. Doctors concluded that the heart attack had started 18 hours previously after the dinner on Friday night. Unfortunately, the catheterization had to wait until Monday due to staffing issues. The decision was made to hold my father until then and manage him medically. That is when I received the phone call. I rushed back to Perry County where my father was hospitalized. It was a long car ride.

On Monday, the physicians performed the catheterization. There were three huge blocks in his coronaries – one block of 99%, another 85% and the last 75%. My family and I were stunned. My father

was only 50 years old and in better shape than men half his age. My father was an ultra-runner. For those of you who do not know, an ultra runner runs 100 mile races. He has finished 5 ultra marathons in the past three years. He has run over 85 marathons in his lifetime and finished at least fifteen 50-mile races. Both his mind and body are sharp. He is a certified public account for the state of Pennsylvania during the day and in the evening he maintains our sheep farm with the help of my mother. My father does not neglect his health either. He sees a cardiologist regularly to maintain healthy levels of cholesterol. His diet and lifestyle are so efficient; my father does not need to take any cholesterol medicines. At the time of his admission, my father's cholesterol levels were not off the chart – they were well within the healthy ranges for his age and current health condition – LDL 144, HDL 52 and his triglycerides were under 200. You can imagine the shock my family felt after we learned the severity of his coronary artery disease.

The only risk factor my father presented with was a significant family history. My father's father had had two heart attacks, both in his 40's. He eventually died of lung cancer since he was a chain smoker. His mother died at 54 from a massive heart attack. She too was also a long time smoker. Considering the history of heart disease in his family, my father undertook the healthiest lifestyle choices possible. He kept a good diet, did not smoke and had incredible endurance and exercise tolerance from all his running.

The doctors explained that my father's current condition was most likely not from plaque buildup, but rather, the doctors said it was “just” an incident out of the ordinary – that most likely plaque had erupted from somewhere else inside his body and had somehow lodged into his coronaries. Even today, they are still not sure, but the physicians believe it was most likely from my father's abdominal aorta.

Upon reviewing the catheterization results, it was decided that my father required a triple bypass. His surgery would be scheduled for the following Thursday of that week. In the days before the surgery, I spent as much time as I could with my father. Though I had confidence in the surgeon, I was nervous about my father's surgery because of the possibility that something untoward could happen. It was my father who was having the surgery done and I could lose him. My

family (mother and brother and extended family) were all incredibly supportive during this stressful time leading up to the bypass surgery. Despite his grave health conditions, my father did not exude any significant stress over those couple of days either. He knew that as a result of the heart attack, his left ventricular wall had suffered some minor damage, but the surgeon reassured him it was not serious. We both felt assured by the surgeon and cardiologist's report.

We understood from speaking with the surgeon early in the week, that the bypass my father would undergo was an everyday procedure that he had performed hundreds of times. He explained that a bypass is now considered routine surgery and although there can be side effects or mistakes, a lot of these issues had been worked out. The surgery was now the standard of care for patients like my father. So to say I was distraught and upset would not characterize me accurately; more appropriately, I was simply nervous with the "What ifs." My confidence in the surgeon prepared me for what was yet to come.

On Thursday, my father went into the OR for his bypass. When the surgeon opened my father's chest, he could barely tell that anything was wrong with his heart or that any damage had been done. His runner's heart had protected him while under the great deal of physical stress and cardiac ischemia. Upon investigating his arteries further, he found another artery which was over 65% blocked. The decision was made intra-operatively to perform a quadruple bypass. The surgery took four and a half hours. Post-operatively he had to take a three week course of ciprofloxacin for an incisional infection. Thankfully, the infection did not become too serious. If it had, they would have to use a flap from my father's pectoralis major muscle in place of his sternum, which would have to have been removed. Everything continued to move smoothly after his surgery and he returned to work on December 1st.

My father's near death experience was an eye-opening experience for me. Today, the age of 50 is very young. My father is still young to me. He lives his life in the best state of health – beyond what many people of any age are able to achieve. Running 100 mile races is no small feat. My father is proud of his health and his athletic abilities. Here I am at 24, and I would be happy to be as fit as my father. The most sobering aspect of this entire experience was the stark realization of my family's history of severe heart disease. If I have the same genetic background, here at 24 years old, I can look forward to having a heart attack when I am in my 40's or 50's. Compared to my father who works out like a crazy man, I just run two and a

half to three miles a day. I am a big fan of buffalo wings and blue cheese and eat more than my fair share and it is hard to imagine giving them up. However, I have started to eat healthier and have made exercise an even bigger part of my day that it was previously.

My experiences as a medical student definitely helped in getting thorough this entire tumultuous period of my life. You take a lot of things for granted when everything is going well. After second year, I was chosen to do my rotations for third and fourth year as a Geisinger Clinical Campus student. I had chosen to go to Geisinger so that I could be closer to home. My family and my fiancé are incredibly important to me. After this entire experience, I do not take "any of this" – meaning the opportunity to study to become a physician, to be with my father and the rest of my family, to become a husband in a few months – for granted. I do not take the fact that my life is falling into place for granted whatsoever.

You never know when your time is up. Make sure you take your education as a physician seriously. You have to be a scholar if you are a medical student. You have to keep learning about new procedures, new medicines – it is imperative that you stay on top of things to give your patient the best care possible. My father was the beneficiary of excellent training. I am seeking to replicate that dedication in my own education. This event has changed my view on life for the foreseeable future. I intend to eat better, exercise more. I now have a perspective on healthcare that I did not have before I began school back in 2007. Our chosen profession, more than any other profession, affects other people and their livelihood. You need to be there for your patients when something happens in their life.

