

To the Heart Of It

Donating blood, aneurysm screenings vitally important

By Dick Ellis

To the heart of the matter, an aneurysm on my aortic artery means surgery Thursday.

Bad news, though, in this world of newspapers, sometimes means good opportunities to perhaps save other lives. Let's talk blood and aneurysms.

In addition to writing this syndicated column for two decades, three years ago I founded On Wisconsin Outdoor (OWO), a newspaper and website focusing on hunting and fishing. On occasion in this column and in every issue of OWO we ask you, the Wisconsin outdoorsman and woman, to give blood. Our "Real Men Bleed" campaign started long ago using outdoor writers and guides as spokesmen.

Today, our OWO staff regularly gives blood, my family gives, my friends give. After years of donat-

ing, the Blood Center of Wisconsin calls us when each five-week waiting period is up and we're eligible to give again. And here's a promise; they'll feed you like a bear at the bait station...with the sweet stuff... when each donation is complete.

For the first time in OWO and by complete coincidence or pure fate, I was the spokesman in the "Real Men Bleed" public service message in preparation of our July-August issue. After sending the ad to design last Monday, I traveled to St. Luke's for a routine stress test and echocardiogram. By the time I was on the road for home, the call on my cell phone came in. I was told to return immediately. They had discovered a very large aneurysm on my aorta near the heart. If it burst it meant "imminent death".

I juggled a "keep cool" message my brain was sending me so as not to increase my heart rate with the two-minute total shot of adrena-



Lori, Dick and Taylor Ellis wish your families long and healthy lives. Aortic aneurysms near the heart of abdomen can be detected and treated. There is always a crucial need for blood donations.

lin that rocked my body. Think big buck fever times 100. But, I made it to E.R. with Lori, was checked in to the Cardiac floor, and after two days of thorough testing including CAT scan, cardiac catheterization and abdominal ultrasound, I was scheduled for surgery.

This journey has seen me travel from complete calm, like lying awake alone in a dark room at 3:00 a.m.

on the cardiac floor and enjoying a vicious thunderstorm rock Milwaukee, alone with my thoughts, to an increased anxiety each time a new test neared, like the cardiac catheterization that injected dye into my heart to diagnose potentially blocked arteries. My anxiety evolved quickly to hysterics when I was prepped by a staff who greeted me with smiles and

the banter of two outdoorsmen in the group who ripped on each other like trappers in a cabin after eight fingers of Jack. I told them if they did not stop it we would all experience an aneurysm burst together right there on the table. I told Lori it was such an enjoyable experience I almost wished I could do it again...almost.

The good news is that my heart is sound and healthy with no artery blockage, and no abdominal aneurysms were detected. The St. Luke's cardiac surgical team is unsurpassed and the surgeon called this a "bump in your road". The surgical results are considered a "cure" with no additional care related to cardiac disease required. In two months, I should be doing everything I ever did, like losing fish and missing pheasants.

The bad news is that it's still open heart surgery. My siblings and our children may experience aortopathy, a genetic predisposition for developing an aneurysm, or weakening in the aorta above the heart or near the abdomen. My late, great father in his eighties had an abdominal aneurysm that was successfully addressed surgically. I'm lying if I said I wasn't sometimes afraid. Overwhelmingly I am moving forward with a certain calm allowed by God, my family and more friends than I knew I had.

Let me tell you why I'm trying, sometimes unsuccessfully, to stay clear of the "why me" approach. In the elevator from the Cardiac floor, an elderly man and

women talked of visiting their son, my age, who had received a new heart five weeks before. His heart was fine. But the strain on his other organs had been great due to the years of functioning with his bad heart, and he is having a difficult time recovering.

"It's so hard to watch one of your children suffer," the woman said. "I received a new heart 16 years ago. But I wish it was me in that bed instead of him. Our other son also has heart problems."

After Lori had extended our best, the man, with the deep wrinkles of eight decades etched on his face, smiled and held open a door for my family. "I was eaves-dropping," I said. "I'm sorry. I wish your family health." His thanks and continued smile told me I had better not feel too sorry for myself.

I know that four units of blood will be ready for my surgery. I appreciate it. When I give blood, it's for others. I never expected to need it myself. When you give blood this week for the first time, remember your family, your loved ones, or you, may someday need it too.

I also know that the medical experts called the discovery of this aneurysm, because I had no symptoms, a "fortuitous discovery". Pure luck is giving me an opportunity to beat a killer. If your family members have had an aneurysm, proper medical monitoring for you, your siblings and eventually your children is imperative. Certainty is growing that aneurysms are

often familial, or hereditary, and so very often curable. If not addressed, and an aneurysm bursts, you're done.

I'll leave you with one intense fear. What if they give me a liberal's blood on the table to mingle with my own? What if I have a sudden urge to join PETA and release my filet-o-fish sandwich to swim again? If that's in my future....I hope it bursts.

Listen, I like you. Many readers sent letters when Taylor Rae was born, when we lost my father, when I lost Blue after 16 years of

writings, if I may have made them laugh, or when I help them cry. If a reader sends a note telling me they like a column I wrote, for 20 years my response has always been the same; "Your letter meant more than the money I make". It's so true.

So... health to you and your families. Long life. God bless you. And if I may be a bit selfish, God bless Lori, Taylor and me too this week.

Thanks for the ride. See you in the field. ^oW_o

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