



Canadian Women's Heart Health Alliance

Advocacy Working Group | Member Profile



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Woman with Lived Experience

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Alliance member since 2021

Biography

I had a heart attack in April 2003 at school where I worked as a high school teacher. I had just made a pot of coffee for the science teachers in my office and was sitting at my desk reviewing the upcoming lab that my Grade 10 students would do. All of a sudden, I did not feel well and it felt like there was a thumbnail pushing into the middle of my back between my shoulders. I thought that I might have a pinched nerve or maybe just a kink as I had been sitting at the computer for most of the previous evening preparing an exam. I know now that I did all the wrong things.

I told my department head that I would need to go home. She asked if I could write out my lesson plans for the teachers who would cover my classes that day, which I did. I called the office to say that I needed to go home but had lesson plans written up. The principal asked me to bring the lesson plans to my mailbox near the office at the other side of the school which I did. I then started to drive home. On the way I passed my doctor's office and so dropped in to see if anyone could see me. I was able to see a doctor who examined me and asked a few questions. I asked if I could take Maalox as my tummy was a bit "off" and he said yes. On my way out the door, he said that I might want to go to the emergency department for tests as I would get results faster there. I said, "For the heart?" and he said yes. I must have suspected a heart problem to even ask this but was in denial as I was in my early 50's, fit and had had no chest pain or shortness of breath or any of the usual symptoms of a heart attack.

At home I phoned my husband who came home for lunch. After eating, taking a Maalox, and lying down for a while, the thumbnail pressure in my back was still there so I decided to go to the emergency department at the hospital and my husband took the afternoon off work so he could come with me. This was during SARS and the emergency department waiting room was packed and everyone was wearing masks. It was hot and noisy. My turn came and I was called to the back where I answered a few questions. The nurse said that I didn't look sick, and I said that my tummy felt a bit better. He said that he was going to lower the priority level for me and asked me to sit again in the waiting room. After about 20 minutes I stood up to leave saying to my husband that I might catch something from being



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there, but my husband said to me (firmly), "Sit down! I took the afternoon off work so you will wait for your turn!" I am so glad that he spoke up and that I listened to him.

When I was called into the backroom again, I waited about 10 minutes and then was given an EKG and a blood test. After a few minutes, several nurses came running at me, said that I had had a heart attack and moved me to a different room with a "high tech" bed. I was given an oxygen mask and hooked up to many machines and my husband was brought in. I was asked to sign papers to give my permission to be given a clot buster. When the clot buster was given, sadly, it had been 5 hours since my heart attack, so it did not work, and I have a scar on my heart. The next day I was given tests which showed that my heart was still working fairly efficiently and, about 4 days after that, I was sent home with medication. I did a phone-in rehab program, took a year off work and then returned to my teaching job. I still do not know what caused my heart attack, but I do know that it happened during a very stressful year at work. I do have a gene (from my mother's side of the family) that increases my risk of heart attack.

I don't want anyone to repeat the mistakes that I made, and education is key. I strongly believe that educating our young people in the schools is an excellent way to promote heart health.