

News

New heart implant could cut stroke risk for 500,000 people

David Rose Health Correspondent

A simple operation to cover a "pocket" in the heart could cut the risk of strokes and help thousands of patients to avoid the side-effects of blood-thinning medication, surgeons say.

A major London hospital is offering the surgery to patients suffering from

an irregular heartbeat known as atrial fibrillation, suffered by more than half a million people.

Atrial fibrillation occurs where the upper chambers of the heart beat too fast, causing palpitations, lethargy and potentially a stroke. The new keyhole surgery technique allows surgeons to implant

an umbrella-like device known as the Watchman into the heart, preventing life-threatening blood clots from forming and entering the bloodstream. It could eliminate the need for patients at high risk of stroke to take blood-thinning medication such as warfarin.

Prapa Kanagarathnam, consultant cardiologist at St Mary's Hospital in Paddington, part of Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, has so far operated on five patients.

"Atrial fibrillation is one of the main, preventable causes of stroke," he told *The Times*. "But many patients and doctors are unhappy with blood-thinning medication such as warfarin because of the risk of dangerous bleeding and the need for regular blood tests. With this new device, patients can stop

'I am able to enjoy life once more'

Case study

Kathleen Gaster, 70, from Kew, southwest London, had atrial fibrillation diagnosed six years ago. She had been suffering from an irregular heartbeat, breathlessness and despite taking medication she was referred to St Mary's Hospital after fainting.

"I was sent for tests but, after the results, the registrar said maybe you need to be thinking about warfarin," she said.

Mrs Gaster, right, did not like the idea of taking the drug because of side-effects and the need to take it at the same time each day. But warfarin was known to react badly with medication that she was on for a cluster headache condition, so she was offered the latest implant as an alternative.

She had the operation on September 8 and spent only one night in hospital and recovered quickly. "I've not looked back since," she said. "I'm able to enjoy life once more."



taking warfarin approximately two months after the procedure."

Each year, about 12,000 warfarin users have a major bleed that requires hospital admission, because their INR rate, which measures how long it takes the blood to clot, goes up too much. The drugs rejected by many patients because it interacts with a range of drugs, including antibiotics, and some food and drink.

Strokes lead to more than 67,000 deaths in Britain every year, making it the third most common cause of death, after heart disease and cancer. Atrial fibrillation, which is linked to about one in three strokes, often causes blood to stagnate and form clots in an area called the left atrial appendage, a small pouch on the top of the heart approximately the size of a thumb.

A study of 700 patients over five years, published in *The Lancet*, found that the 2.5cm-diameter Watchman, designed to cover the appendage, was as protective against strokes as warfarin for patients with the condition. "The new procedure is minimally invasive, involving a small cut in the groin," said Dr Kanagarathnam.

Jeremy Pearson, associate medical director at the British Heart Foundation, said: "This may be a valuable option for people who are unable to take warfarin long-term."

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