

Jeff Arnold

Age 48

Jeff Arnold was near death on March 19. He was in the emergency department at Saint Luke's Hospital. He was surrounded by ER physicians, respiratory therapists, nurses, stroke team members and lab technicians. Jeff, forty-eight years old, was struggling for his life. He was having a seizure. He was being restrained in order to keep him from doing damage to himself. Four hours earlier Jeff had been preparing to leave home for work. He remembers the beginning of this day, but little else. His wife, Shelly, fills in the details.



Jeff: I remember getting up in the morning. I was tired and had a headache. I went to the bathroom, got dressed and that's all I remember.

Shelly: He sat on the edge of the bed and said he was tired. Then he lay back on the bed. He was fully dressed. Suddenly he just plopped back on the bed and began to breathe in a strange way; it was a low, loud snoring sound. I thought he was just sleeping. Then he sat straight up in bed and said, "Call 911!" After that he scooted himself to the back of the bed and proceeded to act very, very strangely. He was snoring loudly even though he was awake and his left side was not moving properly. I was puzzled and frightened and when I asked, "What is wrong with you?" He laughed and mumbled, "I'm fine!" It was as though he was drunk.

I looked at him and said, "Jeff, you're starting to scare me, what ... I mean ... what is happening to you, can you tell me anything that's wrong?" He replied quickly, "I am fine!" I said, "You are not fine!"

I knew it was time to act. I called his mom who is a retired nurse and said I was not sure what was going on. She told me to get him in the car and go to the hospital immediately. But I said, "Mom, there is no way: He is having trouble breathing and the left side of his body is paralyzed!" So I called an ambulance and they took us to the hospital.

The emergency room physician told us Jeff was having a stroke. The CT scan was not conclusive because Jeff could not lie still; by then he had added a deep laughter to his strange snoring-type breathing. The doctor explained about the three-hour window associated with tPA, the clot buster. He told me that Saint Luke's was doing breakthrough experimental research on stroke. It was not widely available to most patients. Jeff was to be Life-Flighted [helicopter transfer] to the Stroke Center. The doctor recommended that I consider all the options they suggested because they were doing wonderful things there. That gave me something to think about.

Jeff's mom has great insight, and when I asked her what we should do at the Stroke Center, she said, "You just tell them that you want them to do whatever gets him back to us. Whatever that will take; what they think is the best care to give him. They're wonderful down there; it's a great hospital. I feel very comfortable that is where he is going."

I appreciated the doctor's explanation of our options. When we arrived at Saint Luke's, everything was kind of chaotic. They told us that the arteries in the front of the neck, the carotids, were wide open but the back artery, the basilar, was 100 percent occluded and he was in respiratory distress.

When I look back on the whole process, I realize that I was totally trusting. I was thinking of Jeff, the poor guy. I had been making so many decisions and talking for him.

Shelly and her family were told that the clot was quite large. Part of it had been removed but a part had broken off. More work with the Merci® Retriever was necessary in order to clear this vital artery. Forty minutes later the stroke team announced that the clot was gone.

Shelly: That Friday evening, the day of the stroke, we knew he was coming back to us. While standing at the side of the bed with him still intubated, my oldest daughter asked him, "Do you think you might want to go home soon?" He nodded his head – it was a headshake; it was a definite yes, up and down. That made us feel very good, that was definitely his style.

The stroke team physicians and nurses told us that patients with basilar artery occlusions usually die. They do not walk away, let alone go home in less than a week. So we did not have just one miracle that day; we had several.

Sunday afternoon Jeff awakened.

Shelly: He woke up to watch the KU basketball game.

Jeffrey: We would have been watching the game at home if I hadn't gotten sick. I had no idea what had transpired but I knew I was in the hospital. I could not see very well because I had double vision. They told me later that the double vision would probably get better. If it did not get better by itself, there were ways to make it better.

Shelly: The way I look at it is that you know when good people come into your life. Along life's path, regardless of the circumstances, it's a gift. At no point have I really questioned why this happened to Jeff.

Jeff: It just happened.

Shelly: I see life differently now. The things that were stressful and worrisome before, they are small details now. We'll figure it out. We just see the world differently.

When asked for their reflections on the process, or things that might help others if they should encounter similar circumstances, here's what Shelly said.

Shelly: One of the things I would definitely recommend is to come to Saint Luke's Hospital Stroke Center. After the immediate crisis had passed and the clot had been removed, someone in the family suggested I visit with the billing department. The lady came out and said, "You are in a critical situation and we are not going to ask you about your billing now." No one has asked us about billing or insurance. We have gotten great care all the way along. I definitely had a high comfort level there. All the people on the stroke team made us feel comfortable. Very, very comfortable. I think that is important

for people like us coming into something like this. We had the best possible outcome.



COMMENTS

As noted, basilar artery occlusions are nearly always fatal. Jeffrey's "breathing center" was not receiving any blood supply and death was near. Jeff had the good fortune to have been intubated and his breathing was being sustained mechanically until the clot was removed and this sensitive breathing center was re-supplied with blood.



