

John Kelly

57 Years old

John Kelly, a fifty-seven-year-old retired Marine, was to have been in Ethiopia on the day of his stroke. John trains African armies in peace-keeping operations and spends six months in Africa each year. On his scheduled day of departure, January 24, his trip was cancelled and delayed for a week. John's stroke occurred on January 28, four days after his original departure date. Instead of rural Ethiopia he was at home with his wife, Jenna.



John did not have a history of any of the risk factors for stroke. He weighed 180 pounds and worked out five to seven times a week. He had never been hospitalized and he took one aspirin daily.

John woke up at 2:00 a.m. with a terrible headache, blurred vision and extreme dizziness. He felt these symptoms were secondary to a "sinus headache," so he blew his nose, took an aspirin and fell back into bed. He was able to return to sleep despite the headache.

When his alarm went off at 5:30 a.m., he jumped out of bed.

John: I managed to get my trousers and my socks on. When I bent over to put my shoes on, I kept right on going. I fell to the floor. I couldn't get up. I couldn't even roll over. I yelled at my wife to help me get my shoes on so I could go to work.

Jenna: He was talking to me about his headache as he was getting dressed, and the next minute he's on the floor flopping around.

I knew what was wrong. He could not figure out why I was calling 911. He did not get it. He only wanted me to help him put his shoes on!

John: I had absolutely no idea, no clue about what was happening to me.

Jenna: In one instant he was perfect and the next instant, like flipping a switch, he was paralyzed on his left side. You could see it happening that quickly. And he kept saying: "Just help me get my shoes on." He did not realize that his arm wasn't working, his leg wasn't working. I tried to lift him off the floor, and it felt as though he weighed 500 pounds. He was totally limp. That's when I called 911.

From their different descriptions of John's stroke, the Kellys appeared to have been at different events. John knew he could not get his shoes on. He was unaware that the left side of his body was paralyzed and he was "flopping around on the floor."

Fortunately, Jenna's thinking was clear. She made the diagnosis of acute stroke and called 911 despite John's suggestion that it was not necessary. The first responders arrived quickly.

John: I couldn't figure out what the problem was. I just fell over! I know the firemen (the 911 responders) were laughing when I said, "Can you guys help me? My wife won't help me

put my shoes on.” One of them looked at my wife and asked, “Is he always like this?” They thought I was mentally challenged. My wife answered, “He was perfectly normal ten minutes ago. He has had a stroke!”

Jenna: His speech was slurred and, as I said, it was like flipping a switch. His face was sagging, and he was drooling out of the left side of his mouth. He was talking funny and he was not even aware of it. I was crying and screaming because I couldn’t pick him up.”

Then the first responders asked Jenna where she wanted them to take John for medical care.

Jenna: I called a friend and said, “John has had a stroke and the medics want to know where to take him. I don’t know. Where should we take him?” My friend said to take him to the nearest hospital so that’s what we did. They did a scan and determined that he had had a stroke [with no bleeding] and encouraged him to go directly to Saint Luke’s Hospital Stroke Center.

As soon as we arrived at the Stroke Center, the stroke team was all over us. They talked with us about the proposed intervention.

The risks and benefits associated with use of the Merci® Retriever were presented and Jenna gave the team permission to proceed with the attempt at clot retrieval.

Jenna: I told them to go in there, remove the clot so oxygen could return to his brain. They promised nothing, but told me of the study they were conducting. They said the device would

go into the brain, and after they found the clot, they would try to remove it with a clot buster drug or this new device that would pull it out backwards. I told them to go ahead; it was our only chance.

In about an hour they told us that John was moving the left side of his body. They said that four pieces of the clot had gotten away but they might have dissolved.

John was awake during the entire procedure and in no pain.

John: I was strapped down on the table. They told me to lie still. I had absolutely no idea I was in surgery. I was thinking of my runny nose, thinking I had a cold. In reality, I had an oxygen mask on and my nose was dripping. All I really wanted to do was wipe my nose. But I couldn't move my left arm at all. My right arm was strapped down and I thought, "I am going to break this sucker!" My left arm was not strapped down because it was paralyzed, so I could not move it no matter how hard I tried. I did not realize they were doing anything to me but they were. And then it was like they threw a switch! A few minutes earlier I couldn't move my left arm at all, and now all of a sudden I had complete movement. It was the most incredible feeling in my life. And I was able to wipe my nose with my left hand. It was like they plugged in an electric cord. It was quite a surprise.

The Kellys reviewed the experience as follows.

John: If I had been by myself, I would have been dead. I did not realize I was having a stroke. I've never given a stroke a moment's thought. Stroke isn't well publicized.

John's heart monitoring found that John was having episodes of atrial fibrillation, which was the likely source of the clot that lodged in his brain. He began to put the puzzle together.

John: For years I have had these bouts of extra pounding in my chest. They would last from a few minutes to many hours. About six months ago I was having them daily. I tried everything to reverse them but nothing worked – I tried exercising and taking deep breaths but nothing worked.



COMMENTS

Jenna was the key person in John's stroke reversal. She was his forceful advocate at every step in the process. In this time-sensitive process her intervention was what saved him from likely disability or even death.

His atrial fibrillation appears to have been the cause of the clot that traveled to his brain. If the atrial fibrillation had been detected earlier, it might have been treated and eliminated as a source of clots to his brain. However, the stroke was reversed and John still travels to Africa and runs hard and often – thanks to Jenna and his timely stroke reversal.



