

Heart Matters

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A story of survival

Forty-three years on from a heart attack: after four bypass surgeries, Frank still lives life to the full



“I treat every day like my birthday”

Forty-three years since his first of four bypass operations, Frank Hames tells us how he is still living life to the full

In 1976, I was 31 and married with two young children, Frank and Stacey. Given what happened next, it's rather fortunate I was working at the National Heart Hospital at the time.

One evening just before Christmas, I felt a pain in my chest but didn't think much of it. The next morning, still not feeling quite right, I went to work. My job was to assist in post-mortems of hospital patients, many of whom had undergone *bypass*^D surgery, which in those days was a relatively new procedure with a fairly high mortality rate.

I'd just finished a post-mortem when I realised something was going wrong with my own heart.

I was sitting down in the lab, vaguely aware of my colleagues talking, and the next thing I remember is waking up in the coronary care unit in that very same hospital.

I was told I'd had a *heart attack*^D. To say I was shocked is an understatement! A keen sportsman and ex-army, I didn't drink or smoke and had no family history of heart disease.

I'd worked alongside Donald Ross, the surgeon who'd performed Britain's first heart transplant eight years earlier, and now he was telling me I had several blockages in my coronary arteries and a double bypass was my only option. →

MY BODY AND ME

I've always loved life, whatever's been thrown at me and, quite frankly, I didn't have time to die. I knew that the younger and fitter you were, the more likely you were to survive, so I felt relatively optimistic. I think it was harder for the guys I'd been working with, who now had to operate on me.

The surgery was performed successfully and, as was tradition on Christmas Day, Donald Ross served lunch on the ward – but for a world-renowned surgeon we weren't impressed with his turkey carving! Recovery was slow and I returned to work after about six weeks, but it was a little disconcerting when the first post-mortem I did after returning was on a patient I'd become friendly with during my stay.

Working in the mortuary made me realise how lucky I was to survive. I had the best possible help at exactly the right time and that's always given me an incentive to live. I watched my diet and made sure I kept active, although I had *angina*^D which limited the amount of exercise I could do.

Unfortunately, less than a year later, the arteries re-blocked and this time I needed a triple bypass. I bounced back quite easily, but driving from Buckinghamshire to London every day took its toll, so in 1978 I changed jobs, doing forensic work at nearby Wexham Park Hospital in Berkshire.

Around that time, *statins*^D were being tested and I was lucky to be put on a trial to receive them. I've been taking them ever since. It was probably thanks to statins that my arteries remained clear for much longer after my second bypass.

Some years later, though, my condition deteriorated and in 1984 I became so unwell that Donald Ross wanted to put me forward for a heart transplant. This was a risky option – at the time, having a transplant would have given me a life expectancy of around five years. After some discussion between specialists, Donald carried



MEDICAL MILESTONES

Frank has had four bypass operations, involving 11 grafts

out a quadruple bypass instead and, 35 years on, it's clear that was the right decision!

Once again I bounced back, but the worry and uncertainty had taken its toll on my marriage and my wife Valerie filed for divorce in 1986. Later that year I returned to the National Heart Hospital with *atrial fibrillation*^D, which can be common after heart surgery. This caused me to have a number of mini-strokes (transient ischaemic attacks). I was prescribed *warfarin*^D to reduce my risk of having a *stroke*^D in the future and, thankfully, I've not had one since. While I was in hospital I met Carol, a social worker for one of the patients. It was love at first sight, and we married in 1991.

FRANK HAMES: THEN TO NOW

Frank is born on
8 October

1945

Frank gets married to his first wife, Valerie

1967

Frank's first child, Frank, is born



1971

Frank's daughter, Stacey, is born; Frank starts a job at the National Heart Hospital in London

1974



Frank has a heart attack; a double bypass is performed by Donald Ross

1976



Frank has a triple bypass, performed by Donald Ross

1977



Donald Ross performs Frank's quadruple bypass

1984



VALUING FRIENDSHIPS

Frank enjoys getting involved in community groups, where he met some of his closest friends



Photography: Adam Gault. Words: Katherine Woods

clips that were guided to my heart through a vein in the groin. The clips were inserted in 2009 and immediately improved my breathing. But later that year, because of *heart failure*^D and atrial fibrillation, I was fitted with a CRT-D (a *pacemaker*^D combined with a defibrillator).

Four bypass operations, 11 grafts and four CRT-Ds later, I never dreamed I would still be here. A friend who is a retired GP recently asked if I realised I could be one of the longest-surviving heart bypass patients in England, and even worldwide. I think it's quite possible – my first bypass was performed in 1976, which means I'm still surviving after 43 years and counting.

Carol passed away on Boxing Day 2016 after a *cardiac arrest*^D, with no previous signs of heart disease. She had been my rock, always there with me in hospital. When she died I was suddenly on my own, so I turned to my friends. I've always loved being part of a community and I've been the local secretary for the Freemasons for 17 years. It's been a blessing – raising money for charity gives me a reason to live. I'm so grateful to the Oxford Heart Centre for everything they've done for me and fundraising for them is the least I can do.

I've recently found out that the clips from my mitral valve repair have come undone and I'll need another procedure to fix them. In the meantime, I'll continue to treat every day as my birthday, and perhaps by doing so I'll help other people facing surgery to worry a little less and to look forward to what the future holds. **HM**

A few years later my arteries had blocked again and my fourth bypass was performed by John Pepper at the Royal Brompton Hospital in 1992. Despite everyone's fears, I returned to work 10 days later, employing a driver to ferry me between appointments until I was fit enough to drive.

My health was good until the late 1990s, when I developed mitral valve regurgitation (where the heart valve allows blood to leak backwards, putting extra strain on the heart). The condition gradually deteriorated and I was very unwell by the time my sixth grandchild, Sidney, was born in 2007. I was eventually referred to Hammersmith Hospital to have my heart valve repaired by an experimental new technique that used two

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MORE ONLINE

Watch a video of Frank talking about his amazing life at bhf.org.uk/frank.

Frank marries his second wife, Carol; his first grandchild, Luke, is born



Frank's mitral valve is repaired; he also has a pacemaker fitted



1986

1991

1992

2002

2009

2019

Frank has a number of mini-strokes after developing atrial fibrillation



Frank's double bypass is performed by John Pepper

Frank retires and becomes a local secretary for the Freemasons

Frank awaits an operation to fix the clips from his mitral valve repair; he continues to treat every day like his birthday