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The best cardiac care put my heart at ease

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POST-STANDARD COLUMNIST



On Dec. 1, at Crouse Hospital, I was diagnosed with a heart attack. Less than an hour later, I was

in the catheterization lab, where a heart surgeon ran a small tube up my arm and into my heart.

Dr. Joe Battaglia was the surgeon. He's one of eight members of Crouse's team of cardiac care experts. They're expected to be within 20 minutes of the hospital when on duty.

I'd come into Crouse's emergency room during the supper hour that day, after experiencing lots of discomfort since the weekend. My wife, Sandy, drove me.

I wasn't showing the common symptoms: chest discomfort and burning, arm and shoulder pain, numbness, shortness of breath, dizziness or nausea. I just felt lousy; it had come and gone, for several days. I'd never felt quite like this before.

Something was wrong. My own doctor agreed when I called him that night when I dropped what I was doing — eating supper — for the call I wasn't sure I wanted to make.

I've been going to Steve Nash's preventive cardiology practice almost 20 years. Before Steve, I was a patient of his dad, David. Both physicians treated me for high blood pressure and high cholesterol. I thought the conditions were under control.

I should say here that my younger brother, Bill, also was the Nashes' patient. Bill had severe heart disease going back years. He survived many painful and life-threatening experiences, including the same angioplasty I was about to undergo. Bill — aka "Casey" — died in 2006 of a heart attack.

Steve Nash told me he didn't know what to make of the symptoms I gave him. He finally offered me a choice: Suck up how I felt and see if I felt better, or go the ER and get checked out.

I talked with my wife. We decided to go to the emergency room. Steve gave me a suggestion about where to go: his own St. Joseph's or Crouse. I picked Crouse: I'd been there about three years ago — for the first time since I was born at old Syracuse General way back — and was pleased with the care I received for low sodium.

We checked in at Crouse without realizing into what good hands I had delivered myself: The hospital is serious about cardiac care. My own newspaper, The Post-Standard, reported earlier this year that Crouse exceeded all Upstate New York hospitals by 30 percent in the time it takes to analyze what's wrong and treat the patient.

I told the clerk about the tightness in-my chest. Shortly, I was on my back, hooked up to monitors, having blood taken and an EKG done.

"Looks like you may be having a heart attack," the nurse said.

That was verified a few minutes later by the cardiologist on

duty, Ray Carlson, a partner of Joe Battaglia's. Ray told me that Crouse had found that catheterization was the preferred treatment of a heart attack. In fact, he said Joe Battaglia and his teams of three nurses were already on their way to the hospital.

"We'll be taking you down to the cath lab soon," Ray explained.

One of my arteries to the heart was blocked.

Angioplasty improves blood flow by flattening the blockage by inflating a balloon. Sometimes, a stent, a small metal device, is inserted by the surgeon. It supports the artery wall and stays there for good.

I got a stent.

After cutting a small hole in my right wrist, Joe Battaglia threaded a plastic tube into my heart. He watched this view, enriched by a dye, on a monitor to my left.

I lay there, groggy from a mild anesthesia but awake, as the busy team did its work around me, commenting a few times about how they had to make their way through the basketball traffic at the Carrier Dome that night. The procedure took about 20 minutes.

"It's in," Joe Battaglia said, finally.

He showed me the picture of my chest, with the stent in the artery, on the monitor. Wow, is that me? The artery looked like a throbbing plant root.

"It looks good," Joe said. And I felt good; too. All that weariness and discomfort were gone. Fifteen minutes later, settled into a room and what my wife called

the "Barbie bed," I ate a turkey sandwich.

I left the hospital Thursday morning with my faithful companion, Sandy Case, after two days of watchful care by the Crouse team, and the comfort of family and friends.

A steady stream of visitors was in and out of the room day and night. Principal, and most reassuring, was Dr. Ray Carlson, who told me continuous blood tests and a cardiogram confirmed the heart attack was mild. There was no detectable muscle damage to the heart.

I could go back to work after seeing Steve Nash. Ray said I'd have to take a blood thinner for the rest of my life.

One more pill, but a life preserver, for sure.

My visitors included the blood-takers (with their little tool boxes), the skin team (bedsores?), the pill-givers, blood-pressure takers, folks looking into my admission and discharge, and a nurse who explained cardiac care.

Until moments before I checked out, I was hooked up to heart monitors. I had IV ports in both arms. The hole in my wrist was just a tiny scar.

My roommate, a retired lead miner from the North Country, wanted to leave that day, too. He'd gotten a fifth stent from Joe Battaglia.

Thanks for the miracle, guys. I should be back at work soon.

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