

14 MINUTES TO A MENDED HEART

| TEXT BY ANN HETTINGER

Jim Swank lay on a stretcher in an ambulance speeding toward Crouse Hospital, trying to stay calm despite the severe pain in the center of his chest. Even though Swank was still miles from the hospital on that Tuesday morning, he had become the No. 1 priority of Crouse cardiologist Anil George, who had received Swank's EKG by e-mail.

The cardiogram, sent by paramedics in the ambulance, told a grim story: Swank had suffered a serious heart attack that day, and it had closed off 99 percent of one of the three major arteries carrying blood to his heart. George knew Swank's heart could slip into a fatal arrhythmia at any time, and even if it held steady, Swank could be left with serious heart-muscle damage.

"We had to act fast to fix this," George says.

A protocol at Crouse for patients like Swank made sure no time would be lost once his ambulance arrived. He would skip the usual stop in the emergency department and be taken directly to the cardiac catheterization lab for an angioplasty, which George hoped would open Swank's blocked artery, restoring blood flow to his oxygen-deprived heart. Three specially trained nurses who had been summoned to the hospital were already in the lab getting things ready.

Swank remembers seeing George waiting for him when the ambulance pulled up to Crouse's emergency entrance.

"He grabbed my stretcher and started running down the hall, pulling me," Swank says. "At that point, I closed my eyes. I didn't want to see what was going on."

Once Swank was settled on the table in the catheterization

lab, George gave him an anesthetic and other medication and made a small incision in his groin area. The doctor passed a catheter into Swank's artery toward the blockage, then injected a dye that filled up the blood vessel to provide a clear view of the obstruction.

George inflated a tiny balloon inside the catheter. The force of the air from the balloon cleared the blockage, allowing blood to once again move through Swank's artery to his heart. A stent placed in the artery would help keep it open.

Swank remembers experiencing a sensation of heat as the dye was injected — and feeling tremendous relief once the procedure was all over.

"A nurse said, 'You can open your eyes now.' I couldn't believe how quick it was," Swank says. Only 14 minutes after he had arrived at Crouse, the life-threatening artery blockage had been removed.

The speedy care may have not only saved Swank's life but also reduced his risk for debilitating heart disease down the road. If treatment had been delayed, a third of his heart muscle could have been permanently damaged, leading to heart failure and symptoms such as shortness of breath and swollen legs, George says.

Now, about seven weeks after his Aug. 17 heart attack, Swank is grateful that he was spared those complications.

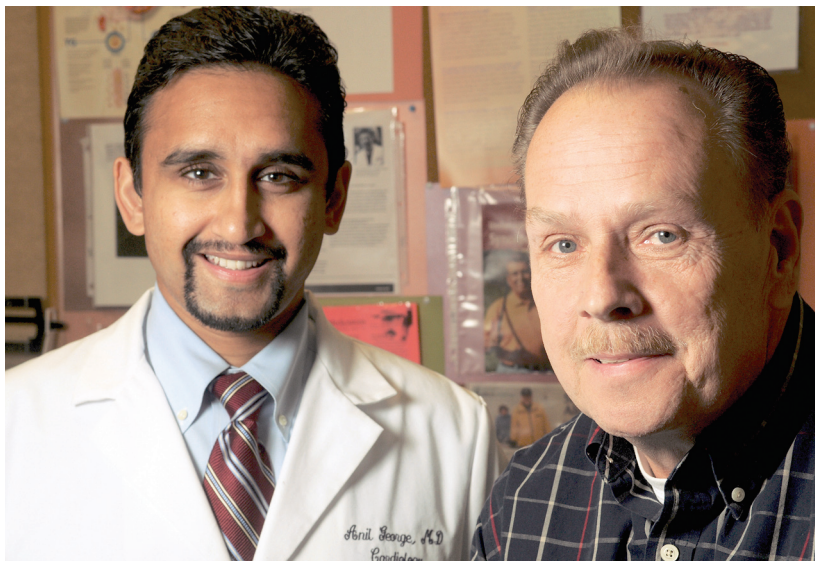
He is getting back to his usual routine, running his delivery-service business and taking care of his 7-year-old grandson every other weekend.

Swank actually has more energy than he had before his

heart attack, and he's working to stay healthy. He has banished fatty foods like onion rings from his diet. When he prepares his meals, he consults a book of heart-friendly cooking guidelines that he keeps in the kitchen.

As a business owner, a father and a grandfather, Swank feels he has a lot to live for: "I have 13 grandchildren. Now I feel confident that I'm going to be with them. I feel good about that." ♦

Cardiologist Dr. Anil George with patient Jim Swank. George performed an angioplasty on Swank to open up an artery that was 99 percent blocked.



PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN D. CANNERELLI