

## **Cardiac rehab for CHD – at 74 I’m finally learning to look after myself!**

By John MacEachern

Amy Fahlman, a young physiotherapist and newly acquired friend of the family, was fascinated by my story and the intricacies of living with congenital heart disease. She suggested that I go to a great cardiac rehabilitation facility that she knew of located in Saskatoon. Living in Nova Scotia, I quickly dismissed the idea and frankly, at the age of 73, cardiac rehab was the last thing on my mind. After having my first surgery in 1945 for tetralogy of Fallot at the age of four, I was told I was fixed. I was also told not to participate in any sports, which in my mind suggested exercise was also out of the question. As a result, I’ve led a definitely sedentary life. Surgery for congenital heart disease was just in its infancy back then and babies like me weren’t expected to survive past childhood. Being “fixed” apparently meant that I wouldn’t need to see a cardiologist again, and remarkably I didn’t until I was fifty, when I collapsed at Mt. Tremblant, Quebec.

A month after chatting with Amy, she called to tell me that there was an equally good cardiac rehab program in Kentville, NS, only a 45-minute drive from my home. I promised Amy that I would check it out, which I did, and to my delight it was fully booked until the spring session! Reluctantly, I signed up, and as the date got closer, I really didn’t want to go but I had made a commitment to Amy and my family.



**John (in the middle) with his wife and family**

I arrived at the Annapolis Valley Regional Hospital and started the program, which consisted of lectures, exercise, and cooking and nutrition classes two days a week for eight weeks. The exercise portion of the program had me terribly scared but I was greeted by three friendly and enthusiastic nurses and an energetic kinesiologist, Stacy. There were fifteen of us in the class, with me being the eldest. At each visit our blood pressures were taken and we were each outfitted with a heart monitor. The gym, located within the hospital, had a number of cardio machines such as bikes, treadmills, etc. and numerous aerobic pieces of equipment. We were instructed on the use of each of them and told to listen to our bodies and not overdo any of the exercises. Our blood pressures were taken at the beginning and end of the daily exercise routine and our heart rates recorded as well. After the first day I thought to myself, “Well, that wasn’t too bad” and by the end of the eight weeks I didn’t want it to end! I can’t believe I’m writing this – but it’s true! I was so motivated that Stacy gave me exercises to do on my own and I’ve continued with them at a nearby gym at 14 Wing Greenwood, Atlantic Canada’s largest Air Force base, only fifteen minutes from my home. Classmates living closer to Kentville are welcome to use the gym at the hospital or at Acadia University in the mornings.

I know this is naive and perhaps ignorance was bliss, but I had no real idea of the benefits of exercise until I enrolled in the cardiac rehab program. Perhaps I had just shut it out of my mind having been told as a child to live my life without sports. As a result of the program I have lost 40 lbs. to date, my blood sugar levels have gone down, my blood pressure has gone down, my bad cholesterol has gone down, and my good cholesterol has gone up! The tests I was given at the beginning, such as walking for six minutes and sitting/standing, have improved by one-third and three times, respectively.

I just turned 74 and am finally learning to look after myself thanks to Amy and the Annapolis Valley Cardiac Rehab Program, under the direction of Dr. Wightman. If there is anyone who is shying away from joining such a program, don’t. Just do it. You’ll love it and you will be thankful you did.



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