

The Flatline

The first patient was on the table, a valve replacement, and world renowned cardiothoracic surgeon Dr. James McCreary was ready to go. He spent two and a half hours inserting a catheter into the patient's blood vessel to guide the new valve into the heart.

"Ahhh," said James, rubbing his chest as he was about halfway through the first operation.

"Something wrong, Honey?" asked the scrub nurse, Haven McCreary, his wife.

"Oh, it's nothing, just a little chest pain. It comes with my allergies, you know."

The surgery soon ended, everything went according to plan. Wanting to relieve some of his pain, James took some ibuprofen and carried on with his day.

About two hours later, the next surgery was set to begin. The chest pain Dr. McCreary had been dealing with had not gone away, and he was surely feeling the effects of it more now. Nonetheless, he started the next operation, a four-hour-long coronary artery bypass.

"Are you okay? You look a little pale and clammy," said the anesthesiologist, Dr. Blake McConnell.

"Just fine," James assured, "Just a little warm in here, that's all."

The deeper he got into the patient's chest, the worse he felt. Sweat was dripping from his forehead like light rain falling on a warm summer day. Still, he kept quiet and continued work as he had a new group of surgical interns accompanying him in the OR eager to see such a major surgery.

"What I'm doing now is stopping the patient's heart temporarily, but I am using a machine to keep blood flowing. I'll take a healthy blood vessel from the leg and attach it to the

aorta to help with the blockages.” When he looked up, he saw a big group of bug-eyed interns who were shocked at seeing what he had just done.

At that same moment, a wave of pain crashed into his chest, and he swayed back and forth while standing over the patient.

“Woah, woah, woah, I gotcha,” said Haven as she grabbed his arm, “Let’s sit down for a second and get you some water.”

Back pain now accompanied the chest pain for James, but he still refused to say anything. He was white as a ghost, shivering, and breathless.

“Why don’t we let someone else take over here,” said Haven.

“No no no, I can finish. I just got too hot. I also haven’t eaten much today. Blood sugar must be low. Old person problems, ha!” chuckled James.

“If you say so,” said Haven, still not completely convinced.

He went on to take the vessel from the patient’s leg, and he allowed one excited intern to assist him. The rest of the surgery went well, and he closed the patient with no issues. At this point, the back and chest pain was at its peak. As he was walking out of the OR, his wife approached him.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” She added, “You really don’t look well.”

“I’m fine, just not feeling too great. It’s the weather and my low blood sugar from not eating. I think I’m going to head to the on-call room and get some rest before the transplant surgery.”

With a quick kiss, they parted ways. Once he got to the on-call room, he took some more medicine and went to sleep. He woke up about an hour and a half later feeling a little better and

ready for the transplant surgery. “The donor heart is here and ready for transplantation, sir,” said the transplant nurse on his surgical team.

“Great. Let’s go save this girl’s life,” said James.

The donor heart was sitting on ice, close to the table, and the patient had already been put under by Dr. McConnell.

“Alright everybody, let’s get started,” said James.

Dr. McCreary’s chest and back pain had come back once more, but there was no way he was going to let anyone else do this major surgery on this long-time patient of his with a congenital heart defect. He cracked her chest and used a rib spreader to officially get her heart out in the open.

The patient had been connected to a heart-lung machine, which would pump blood to the rest of her body while her heart was being replaced. As sweat poured from his forehead and bolts of lightning shot through his chest, James finished separating the major blood vessels and arteries, and he removed the diseased heart. As he reached over to grab the new heart, things started to go black.

James hit the OR floor like a ton of bricks.

“Dr. McCreary!” yelled Dr. McConnell.

Haven was also assisting with the surgery. She, of course, rushed to him immediately. “I can’t feel a pulse! We need to intubate! Somebody get me a gurney and a crash cart and an ultrasound now!”

James was quickly placed on a gurney, and she began CPR until the crash cart got there while a nurse intubated him. In the meantime, assisting surgeons were trying to get the donor

heart into place into the young girl's chest. Another cardiothoracic surgeon was on the way, but it would be a good matter of time before he would arrive.

"Charge to 200," said Haven, "Clear!"

200 volts of electricity ran through James' body, but still no pulse was present. A tube was all that was breathing for him.

"Where's my ultrasound?" screamed Haven angrily as she began CPR for the second time.

About a minute later, the ultrasound machine rolled in, and she placed the probe on his chest.

"Oh my...a ruptured aortic aneurysm...he's bleeding internally...we have to get him to an OR now!. Are there any that are open at this moment?" she said urgently.

"No, all of them are full of surgeries that won't end for hours," replied the panicked OR nurse.

"We're gonna have to open him up right here, right now. We have no other choice. I know I'm just a scrub nurse, but I have watched and assisted him in this kind of surgery a million times. Someone get in here and assist. Scalpel," ordered Haven. They truly did have no other choice, so they handed her the scalpel and she began surgery on her husband. "There's too much bleeding. I need more suction."

The 53 year old had lost about 30% of his blood volume, but Haven continued working. "Get me the graft, now! Come on, James! I can't lose you!" Tears of anger and fear flowed down her face. She was able to insert the graft, but he was crashing. He was still losing so much blood, and she couldn't find the source. Minute after minute went by, and the bleeding was only getting

worse. The monitor was blaring at the sight of a flatline, her heart was pounding, and then she finally spotted it: a leak in the graft, and was able to stop it. His heart resumed beating.

“Stats are coming up,” said Dr. McConnell.

“Let’s get him to a room, now,” said Haven.

James rolled out of the OR that day with a huge incision in his chest and a breathing tube down his throat. Haven collapsed to the floor in exhaustion and relief. She had done it. She had saved his life. The other cardiothoracic surgeon had made it just in time to save the heart transplant receiver’s life. Her surgery was successful, and the patient was set to make a full recovery.

A few hours later, when James was able to breathe on his own, he woke up in a hospital bed a little frazzled. “What happened? Why am I here? Where’s my patient?”.

“You had an aortic aneurysm that ruptured in the OR. We had to open you up right then and there. You’re lucky to be alive, as many people don’t survive these kinds of things. Your patience is just fine. The surgeries were a success for both of you. You’re just so extremely lucky, and so am I,” said Haven.

“Oh goodness. I had been feeling off but just assumed it was something mild. I had no idea. I’m so sorry.” They shared a quick hug and kiss, and soon James was alone in his recovery room.

He was going over charts for the patients he had done surgeries on earlier that day when Dr. McConnell shuffled into the room. “You gave us quite a scare in there,” he said.

“I know. I’m sorry. I should have told someone that I was feeling off. I just couldn’t leave those patients” said James.

“That’s how you know you’re an exceptional surgeon. You put your patients first. Never stop doing that, but next time, if you feel off, PLEASE tell someone!” replied Dr. McConnell.

They both were laughing now, James with tears in his eyes. “Thanks for everything,” he said.

Dr. McCreary was set to make a full recovery, but he would have to stay in the hospital for quite some time to recover. Haven McCreary was recognized for her bravery and leadership in the OR. Her husband could not have felt more thankful.

After all of this took place, North Mercy Hospital went on to become one of the top surgical hospitals in the country, preparing for any medical disaster that may come its way.