The Scottish Mail on Sunday

Date: 30 March 2025
Page: 50

Doctors were baffled when John fainted six times – then a new heart gadget found the terrifying cause

By **Luke Chafer**

WHEN John Moffett started to suffer repeat bouts of fainting, doctors were stumped as to the cause.

The 64-year-old librarian from Cambridge says the episodes began 'seemingly at random' – he would experience a surging pain in his chest and then wake up on the floor several minutes later.

'The first time it happened was in the kitchen,' recalls John. 'I'd had a couple of drinks so I didn't give it much thought. It was only after the second time, which happened when I just got off my bicycle, that I realised something might be wrong.'

Eventually he saw his GP, but tests didn't reveal anything untoward. And so John was placed on a non-urgent waiting list to see a cardiologist. Two months later he fainted for the sixth time in a year – it was at this point that his partner, Johanna, convinced him to go to hospital.

While in the waiting room at Addenbrooke's Hospital, John fainted. Unsurprisingly, he was promptly admitted.

But after a night of monitoring in the hospital, heart specialists were still no closer to finding what was the matter.

So John was offered the chance to join a medical trial – an offer which he believes saved his life.

Doctors proposed fitting him with a innovative new heart monitor called the BodyGuardian. The device, roughly the size of an electric razor, is stuck on to the skin over the heart and can be worn for up to two weeks to monitor the organ at all times to pick up any abnormalities.

And after two weeks, doctors were able to finally give John a diagnosis.

The BodyGuardian had picked up that, when he fainted, his heart was stopping for up to 12 seconds at a time.

John was told he had a condition called sinus node disease, where the heart is unable to beat at its natural rhythm.

AROUND 20,000 people in the UK have been diagnosed, and it is particularly common in over-65s. Those with the condition are at a heightened risk of deadly heart failure, cardiac arrest or stroke.

Sinus node disease can be effectively cured by fitting a pacemaker – an implanted device which ensures

The Scottish Mail on Sunday

Date: 30 March 2025
Page: 50

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the heart beats normally.

However, many patients are diagnosed too late because existing heart monitors are designed to be worn for up to two days at most.

Since many patients, like John, can go a week or more without showing any rhythm issue, this means sufferers go undetected.

And since research suggests that around 650,000 people go to A&E every year with unexplained fainting, experts say better monitoring technology is urgently needed in order to save lives. Researchers believe the BodyGuardian monitor could be the answer.

The trial that John took part in involves 2,000 patients across 56 hospitals and is funded by the British Heart Foundation.

The findings are expected to be published next year, and experts are hopeful that, at that point, it be rolled out across the NHS to spot the early signs of heart defects.

Professor Matthew Reed, an emergency medicine specialist at the University of Edinburgh and lead researcher of the BodyGuardian trial, says: 'We currently have a real problem, in that patients who come in after experiencing blackouts are hard to diagnose and the available technology is outdated.

'This new device fixes that problem and has a much higher pick-up rate than what is available, so will save lives.'

At the moment patients who go to A&E after experiencing unexplained fainting are given a monitoring device called a Holter.

It was designed in the 1940s, can be worn for only two days, patients often complain about its bulky design and it can take weeks to receive one.

The BodyGuardian, however, is fitted when the patient first arrives at hospital.

Professor Reed adds: 'All of this means that we are undoubtedly missing cases of potentially fatal heart defects.

'There is a crucial window after someone has fainted where we are able to monitor their heart to see why this has happened, so we need to get them a monitor as soon as possible.

'Without the new monitor, patients are sent away with no prospect of an immediate follow-up and a fear that they may drop dead from a cardiac arrest.'

Early findings from a smaller study suggest that the new monitor is at least 40 per cent more effective than a traditional Holter device, meaning that nearly 70,000 more people a year could be diagnosed with a heart abnormality.

Researchers have found that a third of patients who arrive at A&E have some form of heart rhythm abnormality. While ten per cent of patients have a condition that leaves them with an immediate threat of cardiac arrest.

Last year, John was fitted with a pacemaker – and since then he has not fainted or experienced any other worrying symptoms.

'Without this machine, who knows what could have happened,' says John.

'It is certainly possible that I would not be here today.'

IT'S A FACT

Over a quarter of a million over-65s have an undiagnosed heart rhythm problem, according to the British Heart Foundation.

The Scottish Mail on Sunday

Date: 30 March 2025
Page: 50

JOHANNA WARD

JUST IN TIME: John Moffett had a high risk of cardiac arrest