

For Heart Patient, Clinical Trial Eases Years of Chest Pain

Just three years ago, 77-year-old Bob Houck had trouble climbing the stairs, walking his dog and enjoying time on his boat without having severe chest pains. Daily tasks required taking nitroglycerin tablets, which would help ease the pain.

“I couldn’t lift anything,” says Bob, who has coronary artery disease. “I couldn’t carry the dog across the room. I was very slow.”

At 49, he had his first heart attack. He had open heart surgery at Carolinas HealthCare System’s Sanger Heart & Vascular Institute and his arteries were cleared. But every few years, the severe chest pain would return, and he’d need a new stent implanted to clear the blockage. Over time, he got nine different stents.

“I would have bad pain and take one or two nitroglycerin tablets,” Bob says. “But then every two years, pretty much on the dot, I would have an episode where it would take another stent or two to unblock me.”

Multiple heart attacks and medical treatments later, Bob felt he’d exhausted all his options. Then he learned about the RENEW clinical trial offered at Sanger Heart & Vascular Institute.

The trial tested the use of stem cell therapy to reduce the frequency of chest pains. Bob met the criteria to sign up: He had at least seven episodes of chest pain per week, and he wasn’t a candidate for additional open heart surgery or stents. Hoping to become more active in his retired years and enjoy time with his wife, he signed up.

Helping perform the trial was Sanger cardiologist **Glen Kowalchuk, MD**, who implanted designated stem cells into randomly selected study patients. Houck was the first patient Dr. Kowalchuk performed the procedure on for the trial.

It worked. Three years later, Bob now walks more than a mile a day with his wife. He’s gone all the way from the most severe angina classification, Class 4, down to the mildest designation of Class 1. He still gets occasional chest pains, but proudly shares that his blood pressure and cholesterol levels are “perfect.”

“I’m thankful and grateful for longer life,” he says. “And that longer life is definitely higher quality than what I was experiencing before the stem cell program.”

RENEW isn’t the only trial exploring the impact and benefits of stem cells. Sanger Heart & Vascular Institute cardiologists are continuing to research stem cell therapy opportunities through two other ongoing clinical trials.

The ALLSTAR trial, which Dr. Kowalchuk leads as principal investigator for Sanger Heart & Vascular Institute, is studying the impact of using cardiac stem cells to regenerate heart muscle tissue. The DREAM-HF study, led by Carolinas HealthCare System principal investigator Joseph Mishkin, MD, is currently enrolling chronic heart failure patients who have exhausted all forms of medical treatment.

Interested in participating in a clinical trial at Sanger Heart & Vascular Institute? Talk to your Sanger physician, or call us at 704-355-4794.