



Cardiac transplant recipient Graham Farrar enjoying life on the farm after a 17-week stay at Harefield Hospital

A patient's view

A year past my sell-by date

by Graham and Frances Farrar

Graham:

To be told that you are terminally ill with only a maximum of 18 months to live without a heart transplant is traumatic. But being able to share my experience over a year past that 'sell by date' is testament to the skill of staff at Harefield Hospital.

Without warning, I became very unwell in January 2009 and was diagnosed with dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM). I was initially treated in the South West and thankfully my local cardiologist recognised that I should be referred to Harefield for assessment as a candidate for cardiac transplantation. I was placed on the potential recipient register in August 2009.

My condition during the next few months deteriorated dramatically. Not only were there the

inevitable, obvious symptoms – extreme fatigue, breathlessness, loss of motivation and despair, but also a decline in vital organ function - the liver and kidneys. In March 2010 Harefield's surgical team implanted left and right ventricular assist devices (VADs) – artificial pumps, to support my heart - pending the availability of a donated organ.

I was confined to bed and remained in the Intensive Therapy Unit (ITU) for the next six weeks. This was a critical period drawing on the fathomless abilities of all disciplines available at Harefield - physicians, surgeons, the VAD teams, ITU nurses and intensivists. It is my understanding that I was a complex case and I am particularly indebted to Dr Nick Banner for his unfailing support and expertise.

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It was nine weeks after my VAD operation that I was woken up on the transplant ward, early one morning, by one of the , transplant co-ordinators, who told me that a suitable heart might be available.

Recollections of the next five hours are quite vivid and surreal, life suddenly became very busy with a stream of visits from the key players in the pending operation and others as news spread. Off-duty nurses were texted by those looking after me as there was a genuine air of excitement. Transplant co-ordinators provided frequent updates regarding progress with the organ recovery. I felt like an astronaut about to be launched into the unknown. As for my emotions, it was overwhelming relief. I was bedridden, with no chance of recovery, I would not survive without the two VADs and not for much longer with them. As I was wheeled along to theatre around 12 noon with my entourage of nurses, the VAD team, anaesthetists, theatre staff and, of course, my wife, I felt relief that whatever the outcome I was no longer going to be terminally ill.

Surgeons Mr Andre Simon and Mr Mohamed Amrani led the team in a successful transplant operation.

I don't recall coming round in ITU, I just became aware of being alive. I left the ITU after just four days to recover on the transplant ward. Initially physically too weak to stand or walk, under the expert supervision of the physiotherapists, I embarked on a rigorous rehabilitation programme, which was fundamental to my recovery, physically and psychologically. The constant support and care of the ward nursing staff helped me overcome the challenges of reintegration into the world; the first trip in a wheelchair into the summer air, around the grounds to the restaurant and into Harefield. Five weeks later and once I was able to manage stairs safely I was discharged.

This transplant has had a profound and positive impact on my life, something I really thought I was going to lose. During these past few months my wife and I have been able to revisit and progress many of the projects on our farm that we had to postpone in 2009.

But there is another side to this story, that of the experience of my wife Frances and daughter Stephanie. Their extreme anxiety whilst I was in ITU can only be imagined. Arguably it is the relatives of long-stay patients who have the toughest time. My wife stayed with me at Harefield for all but one of my 17-week stay.

Frances:

“Being removed from your home environment (250 miles in my case) and the support of friends for such a prolonged period can be a very lonely and stressful experience, made worse when effective communication with Graham was often not possible and progress to recovery not always evident following his VAD operation. Importantly, Harefield has an open and supportive environment with staff from all disciplines providing clear and frank explanations of Graham’s condition whenever requested. This friendly, understanding environment supported me through this very difficult period. On the day of the transplant, I experienced a mixture of emotions; anxiety, hope and relief that the waiting was now over. It was wonderful to see Graham come round from the operation the following day and begin to achieve the milestones towards his remarkable recovery”.



“Harefield is a remarkable institution, its leading research, pioneering surgery and commitment to patients is the reason I am here now. My family and I are eternally thankful to everyone.”

Graham Farrar, cardiac transplant recipient