

For heart attack patients, timing is everything

To say time was of the essence for Tammi Fanson on July 18, 2022, would be an understatement.

The Gibson City, Illinois, woman had been dealing with high blood pressure, stress, fatigue and shortness of breath, but she chalked it up to life just being difficult. But on that day, she found herself at her local Gibson Area Hospital in the midst of a heart attack.

Fanson was then taken by ambulance to [OSF HealthCare Heart of Mary Medical Center](#) in Urbana, Illinois – around 40 minutes on a regular drive but half that with the blaring red lights. That, combined with the cooperation between the two hospitals, and Fanson was fast-tracked straight to the cardiac catheterization laboratory at OSF Heart of Mary, something Tammi and her husband Doug say saved her life.

“They knew me,” Tammi Fanson says. “They knew exactly what was going on. There must have been a lot of communication even before I got there. So it was very comforting.”

“The comfort that she had knowing this crew was waiting for her, it’s pretty remarkable,” Doug Fanson adds.

Fanson’s case is an example of the importance of what’s known as door to balloon time. That measures the time between when a patient has first contact with a medical professional to when a balloon is placed in their heart’s arteries to get rid of blockages and resume blood flow. For Fanson, she had a balloon within 27 minutes of arriving at OSF Heart of Mary.

“Time is muscle here in the cath lab,” says Jo Lehigh, a registered nurse at OSF Heart of Mary who was on Fanson’s care team. “Every minute that goes by could be tissue death.”

That means Lehigh and other OSF caregivers in the cath lab have to be agile. For starters, they have a limited response time to get to the hospital once they get the page that a patient is inbound.

On the balloon process itself, Lehigh says physicians start by accessing an artery through a patient’s wrist or groin.

“We send in a catheter. We go up into the heart and we shoot in contrast dye. The contrast dye helps us to visualize the artery to see where the blockage is located and how severe it is,” Lehigh says. “And from there, the doctor goes in with a small balloon on the catheter and inflates the balloon. Then we’ll go in with a stent and another balloon to open it up. So we have blood flow after it’s all said and done.”

The Fansons praise Lehigh for the care Tammi received.

“She was our angel,” Doug Fanson says, the emotion in his voice strong.

Tammi Fanson recalls Lehigh at her side in the heat of the battle to save her life.

“I said, ‘Am I going to be OK?’” Fanson says. “And she was right there assuring me that everything was going to be OK.”

Lehigh followed up with Fanson, too, during her stay at OSF Heart of Mary.

“I do go down and check on the patients. I make sure they’re doing OK and just kind of show my

face because a lot of times they can remember my name and remember my voice, but they don't really remember me or what I looked like." Lehigh says. "So I have to go down there and just kind of keep up on them and make sure they're doing OK. I think that builds a good relationship."

Four heart stents later, Fanson is now recovering at home and is doing well. She's enrolled in [cardiac rehabilitation](#), a typical but vital part of the path back to normal. But most importantly of all, Fanson has a new lease on life. She appreciates the importance of diet, exercise, healthy blood pressure and knowing your family history of heart troubles. And she's found ways to reduce stress, at least temporarily, like watching the sunrise with no distracting devices in sight.

"I could have easily went back to sleep that night," Tammi Fanson says, recalling the evening that changed her life. "Don't do that. Go in [to the hospital]. Get your regular checkups. And listen to your body."

"Listen to [your health care providers]. Rely on them. Lean on them. They're experts," Doug Fanson says. "It helps you get through the traumatic times."

Lehigh concurs with all those sentiments. She adds that if you find yourself in Fanson's shoes – having sudden, significant symptoms of a heart attack – don't drive yourself to the hospital. Call 9-1-1.

"The ambulance is going to have everything there that you need," Lehigh says. "They're going to have the electrocardiogram, the aspirin. They're going to have all the equipment and supplies they'd need to help make this a smooth and quicker process."

Learn more about heart care on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).