Surgery Saves Santa's Holiday

Chance Ryan

Sometimes even Santa Claus is in need of a state-of-the art medical procedure. For more than 24 years, Paul Crochet, 73, of Houma, LA, has played the role of Santa at Southland Mall, entertaining kids with his natural Claus-like features and jolly Cajun accent. But when Crochet sought relief from aortic stenosis, he learned his only option would be an unconventional trial surgery.

If left untreated, Aortic stenosis makes it difficult for blood to flow throughout the body. If left untreated, the condition worsens, which could lead to heart failure and an increased risk of sudden cardiac arrest. Chest pains, fatigue, feeling faint and shortness of breath are common symptoms of aortic stenosis. "I was in a lot of pain and was having some trouble breathing," Crochet said. "But I had the surgery done, and everything is fine now."

Because of Crochet's severe lung disease he had to forgo the conventional open-heart surgery usually performed for aortic stenosis. Instead, Crochet was given the option to participate in a clinical trial that involves a catheter-based procedure to implant an artificial valve. Dr. Peter Fail, a cardiologist at Houma-based Cardiovascular Institute of the South, said the investigational procedure was Crochet's only option, which replaces the need for conventional aortic valve replacement. "We were able to implant a stent valve — a procedure called TAVI," Fail said. "The only option was to do this or nothing." TAVI is short for transcatheter aortic valve implantation.

Fail performed Crochet's procedure at Terrebonne General Medical Center on Oct. 19. Fail and Dr. Edgar Feinberg II, a CIS heart surgeon, are the primary doctors involved in the clinical trial at Terrebonne General Medical Center. CIS and TGMC are among 45 medical centers in the U.S. that participate in the study.

The procedure works by using a catheter to guide an artificial valve to the heart artery. Once the valve is in place, the catheter is removed and the newly implanted valve expands, correcting the issue of restrictive blood flow. Crochet was released from the hospital after four days, Fail said. "It worked great," Fail said. "We saved Christmas."

Crochet is expected to see "dramatic improvements in his ability to do things," the doctor said. Crochet said he feels much better, and he's able to perform the job he loves without any pain. "It's very rewarding seeing the expressions on these kids' faces." Crochet said the operation is fairly simple, and he recommends the surgery to patients who are given the option. "Christmas will be on time this year," he said.

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