

Derailed hearts, lives

Sacred Heart program helps heart patients get back on track

By Sheri Metzler
Of the Emerald

Heart disease is the number-one killer of Americans today, but for those people who suffer heart attacks and survive, life can take some time to get used to.

Heart attacks are like time bombs, according to Dr. Jim Jackson, director of the University Student Health Center.

"Lifestyle problems such as the type of foods one eats, stress amounts and smoking are usually set in the young adult years. One's lifestyle may reflect what will happen when one is older," he said.

People usually have heart attacks when they are in their 50s and 60s, he added.

A myocardial infarction, the scientific term for a heart attack, occurs more frequently in older adults.

One heart problem that sometimes occurs in younger people is arrhythmia, where the heart does not beat properly, Jackson said. This and most heart problems are not common in young adults, however, he said.

Sacred Heart General Hospital in Eugene has a program to help people return to normal lives after heart problems.

"The patient starts out in the Progressive Cardiac Unit after the fourth day in post-operation," said Lynne Peterson, a cardiac rehabilitation therapist at Sacred Heart.

The object of the program is to get the patient standing, walking and making progress daily, Peterson said. The program begins with getting the patient out of bed and monitoring the patient's heart response, heart rate and blood pressure, she said.

After the patient leaves the hospital, a three-phase program begins.

"Phase one is education about risk-factor modification and warning signals of heart attacks," Peterson said.

Phase two is split into two parts. Part A, when the patient still has out-patient

status, requires the patient to come back to the hospital one to three times a week and involves going to the heart center to work out on bicycles and treadmills.

Part B requires the patient to come to the center once a week and walk on a treadmill for 10 to 15 minutes. There is also formal education about heart attacks during this phase.

Phase three consists of one night a week at Lane Community College where a social support group meets.

"Patients talk about how they have made lifestyle changes," Peterson said. They also walk and do aerobics for an hour, and occasionally physicians will come to the meetings as guest lecturers.

"The support groups totally involve the family, and we encourage the family to come," Peterson said. "A lot of family dynamics become strained, and there is a lot of fear."

Phase three helps patients to understand they are not alone in dealing with heart attacks, Peterson said. It also consists of discussions about risk factors and diet habits, she said.

"Phase three is ongoing and deals with specifics," she said.

Don Buckley and Oscar Haman, two patients that have benefited greatly from the program, both say their lifestyles have changed dramatically.

Buckley, 52, had a heart attack in June of last year and was given a balloon angioplasty to open his clogged arteries after the attack. As principal of Springfield Middle School, he was always on the run before the heart attack, he said. He had a busy schedule that was stressful at times because of his job and community activities.

"You look at yourself as being indestructible," Buckley said.

Although Buckley didn't smoke or drink and exercised often, he has a family history of heart disease. Before the heart attack, he said he felt fatigue but thought it was from working hard.

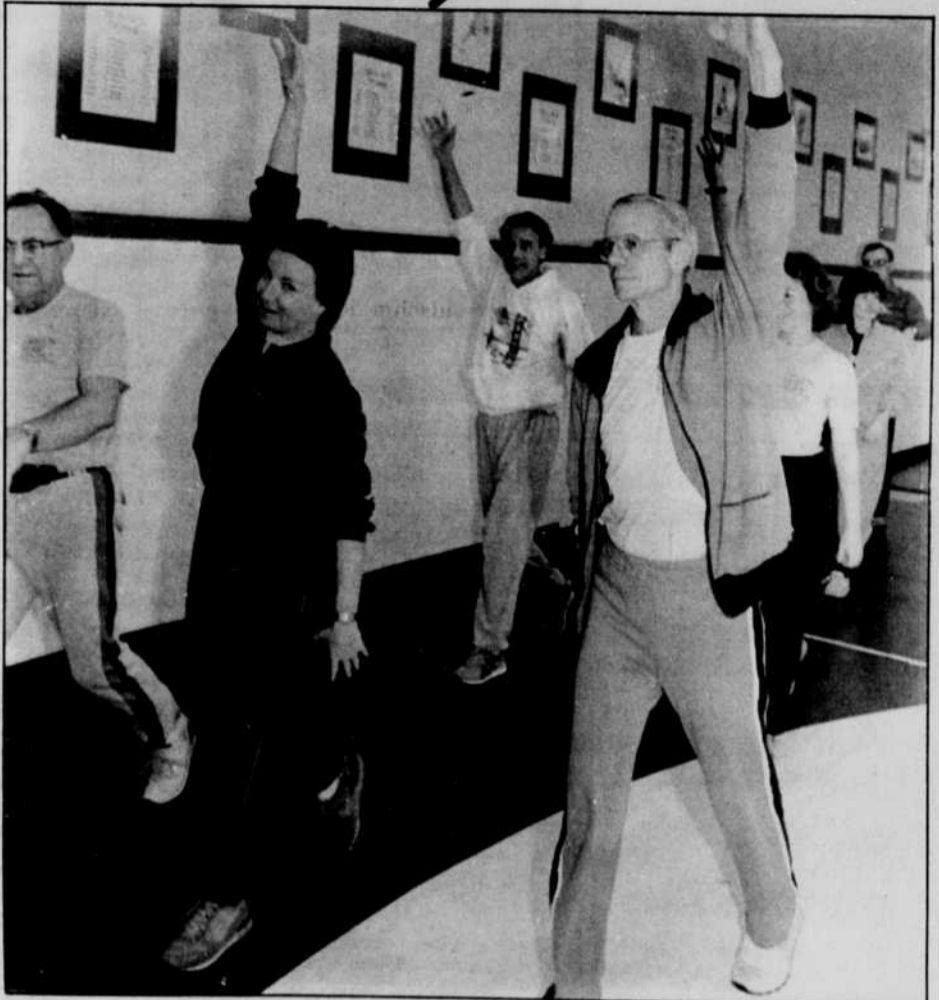


Photo by Tim Jones

During a heart attack support group session at LCC, patients engage in some aerobic exercise to keep recovering hearts healthy.

Since the attack, Buckley has changed his lifestyle in terms of time priorities. He is not as involved in the community as he was previously. His family supports him well as do his co-workers at school.

Haman, 75, underwent bypass surgery on Dec. 5, 1985. Prior to this, he was quite active recreationally.

"I knew there was something wrong back in 1968. It just got worse and worse, and I put pressure on the doctors to see what was wrong before I did have a heart attack," Haman said.

He received an angiogram to see where the blockage was and its extent.

Haman feels much better now and walks between three-and-a-half and five-and-a-half miles every morning. His eating habits also have changed, and he now avoids red meat and high cholesterol foods.

Dr. Bill Temas, coordinator of the support group, said the big factor is comradery.

"It's not an old man's disease; it's a disease that affects everybody," he said.

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