

Taking the Plunge

Heart recipients explore the joys of scuba diving

BY LOREN STANTON

As Mike Sass emerged from his first major heart surgery, he had no idea that he had just beaten some scary odds. Doctors had told Sass' wife, Anne, prior to the operation that her husband had only about a 10 percent chance of surviving the procedure, which involved a bypass and getting hooked up to an artificial heart.

When the 52-year-old scuba-diving instructor regained consciousness after the operation, he could tell from the many tubes hooked to his body and from various discomforts that he had been through something quite serious. Under such circumstances, one might think his first question to the medical staff might be, "How did it go?" or "Am I going to make it?"

Instead, Sass mumbled, "Will I be able to dive again?"

Not only would he dive again, but his passion for the sport would guide him toward an undertaking that doctors and dive organizations tell him is a worldwide first.

The story of how he got to that point started on a morning two and a half years ago, when he went to the emergency room at St. Luke's Hospital in Kansas City, Mo., to have some nagging discomforts checked out. Though he had no history of heart trouble, tests revealed that a circulatory problem was causing devastating and irreversible damage to his heart.

That first surgery just bought him time until a donor heart could be found. His unusual question during recovery in the intensive care unit at St. Luke's stirred consternation among the nurses, Sass said.

"They were monitoring my physical as well as mental state. I think they were wondering if my brain had been deprived of oxygen for too long," he said.

About a week after that surgery, Sass was back in the operating room getting a new heart.

The dream of diving again still had not been abandoned. In fact, during those worrisome days in the hospital, fellow dive instructor Mike McHugh boldly predicted to Sass' wife, Anne, "A year from now we'll be in the Caribbean diving."

DIVING A YEAR LATER

McHugh missed the mark, but only slightly. The men were on a boat in the Caribbean ready to dive one year and one week later.

The goal was reached even though Sass' recovery was rougher than that of many transplant patients because his body did not respond well to the drug therapies. His weight dropped from 210 before surgery to 145.

The return to scuba diving was an uplifting milestone.

"I didn't know what to expect. Then, the first dive was to 84 feet, and it was like nothing had ever happened," Sass said.



The scuba-diving class at the Dive Shop. From left (front): A. Michael Borkon, M.D., transplant surgeon and certified diving instructor, Mike Sass, heart recipient and certified scuba instructor; (center) Steve Bucholz, brother of Sass' heart donor; (back) heart recipients and scuba students Ray Gabel,* Tim Nemenski, Randy Newton and Christina Scholdberg.

"Diving has been such a big part of my life. I knew if I could dive again then I would have turned the corner and that I could approach normal life again."


Sass' surgeon, A. Michael Borkon, M.D., who received his own scuba-diving certificate almost 40 years ago, told Sass that he knew of no other heart transplant patient ever to scuba dive.

"I was a little surprised when I was told I was the first person to do this. Then I thought, maybe there's something I can do here," said Sass, who long has been an instructor at the Dive Shop in Merriam, Kan.

He wondered if other transplant patients perhaps might benefit from the physical and mental therapies that he had gained from diving. He mentioned the idea of forming a scuba diving class for such patients to St. Luke's cardiologist Tracy L. Stevens, M.D., who agreed that it could have merit.

A class of five transplant patients* formed, and they now have several lessons under their belts. Because of the precedent-setting nature of the concept, St. Luke's and Dr. Borkon are monitoring the health and well-being of each student/patient during the training. Doing so will enable Dr. Borkon to develop a protocol for the training program that will be shared with Divers Alert Network, a national nonprofit scuba diving and dive safety association.

Sass is excited about the potential benefits that the instruction program at the Dive Shop could have elsewhere.

"What we do eventually will have an impact worldwide," he said. In the meantime, he is enjoying the company and the enthusiasm of this unique class. 

Loren Stanton is a staff reporter at Sun Publications in Kansas City, Mo.

Reprinted with changes courtesy of The Johnson County Sun (sunpublications.com).

Ray Gabel is community education coordinator at Midwest Transplant Network and chair of the OPTN/UNOS patient affairs committee.