

Paul Bowers Isaacson shares his experience with a sudden heart attack and what he has learned from participating in clinical trials



Paul Bowers Isaacson, London, UK, has faced a long journey, controlling Type 2 Diabetes, a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, for the last 20 years, experiencing a heart attack, and ultimately going on to participate in multiple clinical trials – an experience that led him to use his professional skills to help advance clinical research.



I was diagnosed with diabetes in 1999. At that time, I was heavier than I am now. After my diagnosis, I worked to improve my diet, started walking more, and lost some weight. However, a little over a year later, I had heart attack that felt like it came out of the blue.

It happened during the Easter holiday; I was sitting on my bed in the afternoon reading a book, dozed off, and woke up to a feeling of pins and needles in my left hand, as if I had been lying on it. The pain started going up my arm from the wrist, and although I still did not understand the severity of what was going on, my wife insisted on calling an ambulance.

By the time the paramedics arrived, the pain had intensified. They took me down to the ambulance on the street, put me on an electrocardiogram, and

rushed me to the hospital. I heard them tell me, “We think you’re having a heart attack.”

I was in the hospital for about a week. However, when I left the hospital my recovery was not over. My cholesterol was measured and the figures were through the roof. I was given a statin to reduce my cholesterol, among other medications.

A year or two later when I first joined a clinical trial my statin dose was ‘aggressively’ increased and I went on to participate in a clinical trial for a drug to increase my ‘good’ cholesterol and many trials after that. I am still maintaining that increased statin dose.

Today, I am doing well, fully recovered from my heart attack, managing my diabetes, and taking a medication regimen that has developed through the trials I’ve participated in. I’ve also made this experience part of my work by partnering with David Collier, the Clinical Director at the William Harley Clinical Research Centre where I was a trial participant. Together we started the voluntary group, TrialsConnect, www.trialsconnect.org, an informally run organization of trial participants who use their professional skills to help the work at the center.

The lessons I have learned:

Know your risk factors for diseases and conditions that can lead to cardiovascular disease

For me, it was a bit of a shock to be feeling healthy and fit, and then told I had a condition like diabetes. On the other hand, it wasn't a total shock. My paternal grandmother and her father both had diabetes, so I knew it was potentially a risk for me.

Family history is important to be aware of, in addition to other risk factors for cardiovascular disease and heart attacks, such as hypertension, obesity, high cholesterol, and tobacco use.

Participating in a clinical trial can positively impact your life

I'm a believer in the healthcare system in the UK and in contributing where you can. Right up until the time that I had my heart attack, I was a blood donor and had completed 99 donations. Participating in a clinical trial was another way for me to contribute. It felt good and like I was doing something helpful for the future.

In terms of medical care, I was pleased with the experience and found I received great attention and oversight from the doctors. Typically, my hospital diabetes and heart checks had only been about twenty minutes, but as a trial participant I received double that time, which was very reassuring. They knew my medical history, and after the trial the center also kept in touch and informed me about additional clinical trials that I was eligible for.

In addition, by participating in the trial, I began to feel part of a community of patients. At my site visits, I began to see the same people on the trial and really began to feel part of something, which was important to me on my journey.

Understand that by participating in a clinical trial, you may not benefit, but you're helping future patients

It's important to listen and understand what is involved in the trial, including the risks, so you can make an informed decision. I was on a trial where we ultimately learned the drug failed, but nonetheless I felt good about doing something helpful and useful for the future and so that the next generation may reap the benefit of the research.