

Tom, 78

Former real estate agent, father and grandfather
living with atrial fibrillation, **MELBOURNE**

Former real estate agent and auctioneer, father-to-four daughters and grandfather-to-eight, Tom, 78, Melbourne, was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation (AF) – a common type of heart arrhythmia – in May 2024.

Following an initial misdiagnosis in February 2023, Tom's health took a sharp decline in early 2024. He developed shortness of breath and fatigue while playing golf and riding his bike, as well as fluid build-up in his lungs.

AF is a chronic, progressive disease caused by poor atrial contraction (heart pumping),¹ involving an irregular and often rapid heartbeat.²⁻⁴ The incidence of asymptomatic (showing no symptoms) AF is between 30 and 40 per cent.⁵

Given Tom's risk factors for developing AF – a family history of cardiomyopathy (disease of the heart muscle) and advancing age – he had been attending annual check-ups with his GP to monitor his heart and general health for 15-20 years.

In late 2022, when he first began to experience shortness of breath and breathlessness, doctors misdiagnosed him with mature aged asthma due to his apparently healthy heart scans, blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Around a year later, Tom's symptoms resurfaced again. Going "downhill pretty quickly", Tom was unable to continue bush walking, playing golf and cycling.

When his symptoms re-emerged, Tom chose to purchase an electric bike and golf buggy in a bid to maintain his outdoor activities. In the interim, Tom, his wife and his family grew increasingly concerned.

Following his hospitalisation and diagnosis, Tom met with his cardiologist, who developed a treatment plan for him to control his heart arrhythmia. Tom felt fortunate to have received ongoing support from his cardiologist while living with the long-term disease.

Tom's cardiologist has reportedly been impressed with his response to treatment, to the extent that Tom no longer requires an electric buggy to take him around the golf course!

Today, Tom has chosen to share his story, to raise community awareness and understanding of living with AF, and to urge those affected by the disease to prioritise their health.

This is Tom's story.

Tom developed shortness of breath and fatigue while walking, playing golf and cycling in late 2022. Following a visit to his GP in February 2023, he was mistakenly diagnosed with mature aged asthma. His symptoms resolved the ensuing year, but reoccurred in early 2024.

"I first experienced symptoms in late 2022, when playing golf and riding my bike. I felt puffed out.

"So I visited my GP, and he diagnosed me with mature aged asthma because my heart scan was normal," said Tom.

"For the next 10 months or so, I felt fine, until one day, when all of a sudden, I started to get breathless again.

"I thought it was Spring-time pollen causing the issue. It grew very serious pretty quickly," Tom said.

"Soon I wasn't able to walk 270 metres without stopping."



Tom returned to his GP and was immediately hospitalised for 10 days to undergo further tests to assess the fluid in his lungs. He was subsequently diagnosed with AF. Tom's wife and family were extremely anxious at the time, given Tom's family history of heart disorders.

With his symptoms disrupting his daily routine, Tom grew increasingly concerned he would be unable to continue to exercise or play golf without additional support.

"When I was diagnosed with AF, I felt dispirited by the possibility of having to seek extra help, like getting an electric bike," said Tom.

Undergoing treatment to control his AF was the only option for him, for "the alternative to treatment wasn't that attractive."

Today, Tom has much praise for all of the health care workers who nursed him back to good health.

"The cardiologists have been terrific. They reassured me I would be back to golf in no time following AF treatment, without the need to buy an electric buggy.

"Today, I'm the best I've felt in years. I wonder how long I had been experiencing minor symptoms of AF without realising," Tom questioned.

Post-treatment, Tom has been working hard to lead a healthy lifestyle, monitoring his weight to improve his heart health, following a healthy diet, and not smoking.

He has some simple, but important advice for Australians at risk of developing AF.

"Don't brush any unusual symptoms off, hoping they will resolve on their own.

"If you have any AF symptoms at all, see a doctor without delay," Tom advised.

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To coordinate an interview with Tom, please contact:

Kirsten Bruce and Mel Kheradi, VIVA! Communications

M 0401 717 566 | 0422 654 404

T 02 9968 3741 | 02 9968 1604

E kirstenbruce@vivacommunications.com.au | sam@vivacommunications.com.au

Individual symptoms, situations, circumstances and results may vary. This information is not intended to be used for medical diagnosis or treatment or as a substitute for professional medical advice. Please consult your doctor or qualified healthcare provider regarding your condition and appropriate medical treatment.

References

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