

Botsford cardiologist on cutting edge of pacemakers

BY MARY RODRIGUE
STAFF WRITER

Dr. Robert Stomel displays his collection of pacemakers to illustrate how much technology has evolved since the first manmade device to control a heart's electric system was invented.

The older bulky model looks a bit like an old-fashioned cigarette case, but the newer models are sleek — less than half the size of a disposable lighter and almost as light as air.

But size and weight aren't the only things about pacemakers that are evolving.

Stomel, chief of cardiology at Botsford General Hospital, recently performed the first U.S. implant of a pacing system that uses a single guidewire to monitor both the upper and lower chamber functioning of the heart.

"It's significantly less costly and takes half the time of a traditional pacemaker placement," Stomel said. Botsford, in Farmington Hills, implants up to 140 pacemakers a year, making it a major center.

Stomel performed the procedure earlier this year on an 89-year-old man with an active social life. He says it was a success.

The so-called Unity C pacing system manufactured by Intermedics Inc. of Angleton, Texas, recently received FDA approval. Earlier trials were performed in Europe and Hong Kong. Stomel was given the opportunity to perform the first procedure in this country because of his primary research on the model.

Elderly pacemaker candidates



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN STORMELAND

Medical model: The so-called Unity C pacing system is manufactured by Intermedics Inc. of Angleton, Texas, and recently received FDA approval.

generally receive just the single lead model because of cost and ease of implant, Stomel said. Using a plastic human heart model, he demonstrated how a dual lead pacemaker is inserted through a vein first into the heart's bottom chamber and then a second wire inserted in an upward loop — like the letter J — into the heart's upper

chamber. The battery portion is inserted under the skin near the collarbone.

"It's difficult. There's twice as much X-ray time needed. The lead falls out occasionally. It's significantly more expensive," he said. "That's why doctors tend to put single chamber pacemakers into their elderly patients, not realizing it made much difference."

At an American College of Cardiology conference in New Orleans last week, research was presented that showed the survival rate for elderly recipients of the dual wire pacemaker after five years was 64 percent as opposed to just 44 percent for those with the single chamber system.



Pacemaker placement: Dr. Robert Stomel uses a plastic human heart model, as he demonstrates how a dual lead pacemaker is inserted through a vein first into the heart's bottom chamber and then a second wire inserted in an upward loop — like the letter J — into the heart's upper chamber.

For Stomel, this underscores the importance of the new Unity C.

"The Unity is a single lead with a metal sensor that allows the upper chamber of the heart to be sensed. It senses the atrium and paces the ventricle and allows the ease of putting in a single lead," he said.

Stomel is in the preliminary stage with Intermedics of setting up a multi-center trial for the new pacing system.

"It should be applicable for all patients regardless of age," he

said. "But doctors tend to put in both leads with younger patients. The issue seems to arise with the elderly. This system should provide a nice compromise."

Patients need pacemakers primarily for one of two reasons.

"The patients own pacemaker starts to run wild — either causing the heart to beat too fast or too slow, which is called sick sinus syndrome," said Stomel. "The other reason is when the electrical system is severed, caused by old age. Anytime the patient has a normal beating upper heart, he can have a Unity pacemaker."

replacement can be performed on an out-patient basis.

Stomel lives in Farmington Hills with his wife Elaine Martin-Stomel, his pacemaker nurse assistant. He has two children, Josh and Mindy who live in Prescott, Ariz.

He is president of the Oakland County Osteopathic Medical Society and national chairman of the cardiovascular disease section of the American College of Osteopathic Internists.

He presents several major cardiology programs a year in the United States and has been affiliated with Botsford for 10 years.

"Patients should understand that having a pacemaker installed is not a traumatic event," he said. "It's a quick procedure with little risk of complication and the patient spends two days in the hospital at best."

Pacemakers are installed in patients ranging from infants born without the proper circuitry to the elderly, and all ages in between. They last five to 15 years, depending on how often activated, and

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