

# FEATURES

WHEN TREATING

# HEART CONDITIONS, SOMETIMES less is more

*Invasive coronary treatments are big business for hospitals and cardiologists, but mounting evidence suggests that few patients actually need these costly and sometimes risky procedures*

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ILLUSTRATION BY NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Ira's story is a classic example of invasive cardiology run amok. Ira, of Hewlett, New York, was 53 when he had an exercise stress test as part of an insurance policy application. Though he lasted the full 12 minutes on the treadmill with no chest pain, an abnormality on the EKG led to an angiogram, which prompted the cardiologist to suggest that a coronary artery narrowed by atherosclerosis be widened by balloon angioplasty, with a wire-mesh tube called a stent inserted to keep the artery open.

The goal, he was told, was to prevent a clot from blocking the artery and causing a heart attack or sudden cardiac death.

Wanting to avoid an invasive procedure, Ira decided to pursue a less drastic course of dieting, weight loss and cholesterol-lowering medication. But three years later, the specter of a stent arose again. An abnormal reading on a pre-surgical EKG led to another angiogram, which indicated that the original narrowing had worsened. Cowed by the stature of the cardiologist, Ira finally agreed to have not one but three coronary arteries treated with angioplasty and drug-coated stents, making him one of about a million Americans who last year underwent angioplasties, most of whom had stents inserted.

For patients in the throes of a heart attack and those with crippling chest pain from even minor exertion, angioplasty and stents can be lifesaving, says Michael Ozner, a Miami cardiologist and the author of *The Great American Heart Hoax*. But, Ozner said in an interview, such "unstable" patients represent only a minority of those undergoing these costly and sometimes risky procedures.

Most stent patients are healthy like Ira, who was experiencing no chest pain or

cardiac symptoms of any sort. Yet Ira was afraid not to follow the doctor's advice, despite the fact that no study has shown that these procedures in otherwise healthy patients can reduce the risk of heart attacks, crippling angina or sudden cardiac death. "We've extended the indications for surgical angioplasty and stent placement without any data to support the procedures in the vast majority of patients — stable patients with blockages in their arteries," Ozner said.

What the studies do show, Ozner said, is that putting stents in such patients is no more protective than following a heart-healthy lifestyle and taking medication and, if necessary, nutritional supplements to reduce cardiac risk. The studies have also shown that stents sometimes make matters worse by increasing the chance that a dangerous clot will form in a coronary artery, as noted in 2006 by an advisory panel to the US Food and Drug Administration.

Ozner, medical director of the Cardiovascular Prevention Institute of South Florida, is one of many prevention-oriented cardiologists vocal about the overuse of "interventional cardiology," a specialty involving invasive coronary treatments that have become lucrative for the hospitals and doctors who perform them.

Even some interventional cardiologists have expressed concern about the many patients without symptoms who are treated surgically. "The only justification for these procedures is to prolong life or improve the quality of life," said David Brown, an interventional cardiologist and chief of cardiology at Stony Brook University Medical Center, "and there are plenty of patients undergoing them who fit into neither category."

The treatments — coronary artery bypass surgery, angioplasty and the placement of drug-coated stents — cost

about US\$60 billion a year in the US. Though they are not known to prevent heart attacks or coronary mortality in most patients, they are covered by insurance. Counseling patients about diet, exercise and stress management — which is relatively inexpensive and has been proved to be life-extending — is rarely reimbursed. In other words, procedure-oriented modern cardiology is pound wise and penny foolish. And in these economic times, it makes great sense to reconsider the approaches to reducing morbidity and mortality from the nation's leading killer.

Most people mistakenly think of coronary artery disease as a plumbing problem. Influenced by genetics, diet, diabetes, hypertension, smoking and other factors, major arteries through which oxygen-rich blood flows to the heart gradually become narrowed by deposits of cholesterol-rich plaques until blood can no longer pass through, resulting in a heart attack.

In coronary bypass surgery, a blood vessel taken from elsewhere in the body is reattached to a clogged coronary artery to bypass the narrowed part.

However, as Ozner points out in his book, "three major studies performed in the late 1970s and early 1980s clearly proved that for the majority of patients, bypass surgery is no more effective than conservative medical treatment." The exceptions — patients whose health and lives could be saved — were those with advanced disease of the left main coronary artery and those with severe crippling, or unstable, angina.

Bypass surgery does relieve the pain of angina, though recent studies suggest this may happen because pain receptors around the heart are destroyed during surgery.

"The studies on angioplasty delivered even

worse news," Ozner wrote. "Unless the patient was in the midst of a heart attack, the opening of a blocked coronary artery with a balloon catheter resulted in a worse outcome compared to management through medication." In fact, one trial, published in 2003 in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, found that balloon angioplasty, which flattens plaque against arterial walls, actually raised the risk of a heart attack or death.

Stents were designed to keep the flattened plaque in place. But studies of stable patients found no greater protection against heart attacks from stents than from treatments like making lifestyle changes and taking drugs to lower cholesterol and blood pressure.

A new understanding of how most heart attacks occur suggests why these procedures have not lived up to their promise. According to current evidence, most heart attacks do not occur because an artery is closed by a large plaque. Rather, a relatively small, unstable plaque ruptures and attracts inflammatory cells and coagulating agents, leading to an artery-blocking clot.

In most Americans middle aged and older, small plaques are ubiquitous in coronary arteries and there is no surgical way to treat them all.

"Interventional cardiology is doing cosmetic surgery on the coronary arteries, making them look pretty, but it's not treating the underlying biology of these arteries," said Ozner, who received the 2008 American Heart Association Humanitarian Award. "If some of the billions spent on intervention were put into prevention, we'd have a much healthier America at a lower cost."

Ozner advises patients who are told they need surgery to get an independent second opinion from a specialist.

[ GOLDEN GLOBES ]

## Schmooze and schmaltz on the red carpet

*As all eyes turn to the Oscars, Tina Fey settled some old scores on a night that saw Kate Winslet romp home*

AP, BEVERLY HILLS, CALIFORNIA

They didn't kick off their Sunday shoes and break into dance, but Zac Efron did come toe to toe with Kevin Bacon for the first time on the red carpet at Sunday's Golden Globes.

Efron is slated to reprise the role of toe-tapping rebel Ren McCormack in an upcoming remake of *Footloose*. Bacon shot to fame when he originated the role nearly 25 years ago in the original 1984 film.

"Finally, I meet you," Efron, accompanied by his girlfriend and *High School Musical* co-star Vanessa Hudgens, exclaimed as he intercepted Bacon on the carpet.

The pair chitchatted for several minutes while Bacon's wife, Kyra Sedgwick, who was nominated for a Globe for best TV actress for *The Closer*, conducted red carpet interviews.

"I was always a really big fan," Efron told Bacon.

Tom Cruise must have gotten comfortable in that fat suit.

Cruise, nominated for a supporting actor Golden Globe for his nearly unrecognizable performance as fat, balding, foul-mouthed movie executive Les Grossman in the Ben Stiller comedy *Tropic Thunder*, said he and Stiller are considering bringing the character back in some other format.

"I don't know. We'll see. We keep talking about maybe doing something for the Internet," Cruise said on the red carpet before

Sunday's Golden Globes.

"We really haven't had a moment to talk about it thoroughly but it would be fun," Cruise added. "It's a fun character to play."

For Tina Fey, Sunday night offered not only an opportunity to add to her collection of Golden Globes but to even some scores with her cyberspace critics.

Fey, a frequent target of catty Internet blog postings, collected her second consecutive Golden Globe for best actress in a TV musical or comedy for *30 Rock*, which also took the award for best TV series, musical or comedy.

"If you ever start to feel too good about yourselves, they have this thing called the Internet," she said as she accepted her award. "And you can find a lot of people there who don't like you."

Then, in colorful terms, she went on to name a handful of them, saving her strongest criticism for someone who posts under the name "cougar-letter."

"All year you've been on me. All year," she said, as several famous faces in the audiences laughed and nodded in agreement.

Recalling co-star Heath Ledger's tragic death still chokes up Maggie Gyllenhaal, even during the excitement of the Golden Globes.

"It's so hard to really feel how sad it is with the lights and the television and everybody screaming, but you know it's also



Steven Spielberg accepts the Cecil B. DeMille Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Entertainment Field on stage at the 66th Annual Golden Globe Awards.

very sad," Gyllenhaal, her voice choking, said on the red carpet before the show.

Ledger, who died in January last year of an accidental drug overdose, won the Golden Globe on Sunday as supporting actor in a motion picture for his performance as Batman's nemesis The Joker.

"Our movie I think is great, actually. But I think he elevated it to a completely different place," Gyllenhaal said of Ledger's performance. "It's hard to be that good in a movie that big."

A subdued *Dark Knight* director Chris Nolan accepted Ledger's award.

"For any of us lucky enough

to work with him ... for any of us lucky enough to enjoy his performances, he will be eternally missed but he will never be forgotten," Nolan said.

File portions of Mickey Rourke's acceptance speech under "Things Most Likely to be Bleeped in the Tape-Delayed Version."

As the show was broadcast live to the East Coast on Sunday, Rourke gave a rollicking, slightly profane speech while accepting the best film actor Golden Globe for his role in *The Wrestler*.

In between crediting everyone from musicians Axl Rose and Bruce Springsteen to all of his dogs — living and dead — Rourke heaped praise on *Wrestler* director Darren Aronofsky.

"He hates it when I say he's tough, but he's one tough son of a bitch," Rourke said.

The camera panned to Aronofsky, who offered Rourke a one-fingered salute.

He didn't drop any four-letter words on the audience, but Sacha Baron Cohen managed to make a few people squirm as the *Borat* star poked fun at the way celebrities are surviving these hard economic times.

"This recession is affecting everyone, even celebrities," Cohen said as he arrived on stage to present the Golden Globe for best motion picture, musical or comedy.

"Victoria Beckham hasn't eaten for three weeks, Charlie Sheen has been forced

to have sex without paying for it ... and even Madonna has had to get rid of one of her personal assistants. Our thoughts go out to you, Guy Ritchie."

But Cohen also took a shot at himself.

"It is said that in times of economic hardship that people flock to the cinemas to watch mindless, puerile escapism, which is great news because I've got a movie coming out," he said.

Less than a month after abruptly leaving a hit Broadway show over health problems, Jeremy Piven showed up on the red carpet outside the Golden Globes alongside Mark Wahlberg.

Piven, who also plays Ari Gold on the HBO show *Entourage*, left the critically acclaimed production of *Speed the Plow* last month. The show business trade paper *Variety* reported the 43-year-old actor had been suffering from high levels of mercury, which caused fatigue and other problems.

Piven spoke briefly with former football player Tiki Barber, who worked as a reporter during NBC's red carpet preview.

Piven likened his abrupt departure from the show to a team doctor telling Barber that he had to leave a game.

Barber joked that he often ignored such orders.

Wahlberg ran interference, saying a healthy Piven was needed for HBO's *Entourage*, which Wahlberg executive produces.



British actress Kate Winslet poses with her awards at the 66th Annual Golden Globe Awards ceremony at the Beverly Hilton Hotel, California, on Sunday.

The following is a list of winners of the Golden Globe Awards in the major categories

- > BEST MOTION PICTURE, *Slumdog Millionaire*
- > BEST MOTION PICTURE, MUSICAL OR COMEDY, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*
- > FOREIGN LANGUAGE PICTURE, *Waltz With Bashir*
- > BEST DIRECTOR, Danny Boyle, *Slumdog Millionaire*
- > BEST DRAMATIC ACTOR, Mickey Rourke, *The Wrestler*
- > BEST DRAMATIC ACTRESS, Kate Winslet, *Revolutionary Road*
- > BEST ACTOR, COMEDY OR MUSICAL, Colin Farrell, *In Bruges*
- > BEST ACTRESS, COMEDY OR MUSICAL, Sally Hawkins, *Happy-Go-Lucky*
- > SUPPORTING ACTOR, Heath Ledger, *The Dark Knight*
- > SUPPORTING ACTRESS, Kate Winslet, *The Reader*
- > ANIMATED FILM, *WALL-E*
- > SCREENPLAY, Simon Beaufoy, *Slumdog Millionaire*
- > ORIGINAL SCORE, AR Rahman *Slumdog Millionaire*
- > SONG, Bruce Springsteen, *The Wrestler*
- > DRAMATIC TV SERIES, *Mad Men*
- > BEST ACTOR, TV DRAMA, Gabriel Byrne, *In Treatment*
- > BEST ACTRESS, TV DRAMA, Anna Paquin, *True Blood*
- > TV SERIES, MUSICAL OR COMEDY, *30 Rock*
- > BEST ACTOR, TV MUSICAL OR COMEDY, Alec Baldwin, *30 Rock*
- > BEST ACTRESS, TV MUSICAL OR COMEDY, Tina Fey, *30 Rock*
- > BEST MINI-SERIES OR MOTION PICTURE MADE FOR TELEVISION, *John Adams*
- > CECIL B. DEMILLE LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD, Steven Spielberg

SOURCE: DPA