

Contrary to rumour I have a good heart

I did a small thing the other day and, true to form, it brought the greatest happiness: I simply unpacked a bag, one I didn't need after all.

If you're familiar with serious health ailments that can be diagnosed here in Taranaki but must be treated elsewhere, you'll know what I'm on about.

You report to hospital with an overnight bag containing a toothbrush, a change of underwear and your medications - in case the day ends with a chopper or plane ride to Waikato Hospital or elsewhere.

Imagine the joy and relief when the best thing happened, and I didn't need the bag or the ride or the experience of major medical intervention.

I – more importantly, “they” - had a look into my heart, and there was nothing wrong. I'm good to go.

I'm not exaggerating about seeing how my heart works. The procedure I had is called a cardiac catheterisation (try saying that out loud) and involves a doctor inserting a big needle thing in an artery in your right wrist and poking a thread-thin pipe up the blood vessel to your ticker.

You don't feel anything as they pump dye to the heart. While you lie still, a gigantic X-ray camera on a mechanical arm sweeps and dives and hovers over your chest, taking dozens of images of various coronary arteries to see if they're blocked.

Your heart appears as a dim shadow, but the various blood vessels stand out like dark streams on an aerial map of a river valley. The practised eyes of the doctor and cardiac nurse and technicians can spot where an artery looks constricted and perhaps in need of unblocking with a device called a stent.

My “plumbing” looked fine, said the doctor, and later the cardiac nurse showed us the pictures to prove it. The alarming bout of arrhythmia I'd suffered over summer was therefore likely to have been caused by the wiring, the “electrics”. It's not happening any more, lending weight to my own Google-fed theory (always dangerous) the episode was caused by a virus I contracted late last year. I've heard of others who suffered the same thing.

The episode was frightening, if I'm honest. It stopped me taking daily exercise through Pukekura Park and made me nervous about the future. I even stopped using my blood pressure tester, such was the erratic nature of my BP; one minute I was fainting, the next mopping up nose bleeds.

At times like that, you rake over memories of family health trends. Dad started having angina attacks at 54 (but lasted another 30 years), while granddad on my mother's side died in his 70s from something called “hardening of the arteries”. Longevity is a wilful child in our family tree. Some generations of Tuckers lived into their nervous nineties or even made a century, while some intervening cohorts carked it below 50.

The good thing to come out of this has been to experience the exemplary care of our medical system. While I've moaned in past columns about the emergency department waiting room, this summer I've



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had the privilege of seeing what lies beyond it, through treatment Lin needed and now the exploratory expedition into my internal engine. I can't speak too highly about the people who've looked after me, from GP Peter Rich, to the lads running the hospital treadmill machine, to the professional attentiveness of the cardiologist, and cardiac nurse Nicky.

In the day ward was the unflappable Jan, who put up with my banter with good cheer while maintaining meticulous care of a line of us waiting nervously for the unknown. They all seemed as jubilant with the result as I was. Thank you, Taranaki Base - you're staffed by a bunch of champions.

Have I wasted everyone's time with what has amounted to a false alarm? I'd like to think of it as preventive medicine. No doubt the procedure was expensive, but think how much the resolving of a health scare like that may save the state in future.

That's because I spent the five-month lead-up time prior to the test improving my lifestyle – less fat in the diet to lower cholesterol to its best-ever level (less red meat and dairy, more fish and fruit), a move to low alcohol beer and no wine – and now plenty of exercise, since finding out I can do it without increased risk of heart failure. Money well spent, I'd say.