

Absolutely No Waiting

Sleep on it? Terrible idea for stroke treatment.

Angela Miller will be the first to tell you that she has a stubborn streak, a trait she credits to being raised by a Marine.

So, when she was awakened by a paralyzing stroke on May 7, she did exactly what she should not do: she returned to bed to “sleep on it.” It wasn’t until almost eight hours later when Keith Woodward, MD, neurointerventional radiologist with Vista Radiology at Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center, removed the blood clot from her brain that Miller learned just how fortunate she was to be alive.

It was not yet daybreak when Miller awoke to find her left arm and leg paralyzed. When she told her sleeping husband, Lee, he murmured, “What do you want to do about it?” Her reply? “I said, ‘Well, I guess I’ll go back to bed.’”

Miller had suffered a middle cerebral artery (MCA) stroke, one of the rarer and more devastating forms of ischemic stroke. With a fatality rate of up to 80 percent, MCA survivors are often left with severe – and permanent – disabilities.

“The MCA is the most important artery in the brain for higher function,” said Dr. Woodward. “It controls your arm, hand, speech, understanding and perception of your body.”

Miller, however, shows little to no outward signs of having endured a massive stroke. “Unless you know what you’re looking for or know me personally, you can’t even tell I’ve had a stroke,” said the 46-year-old grandmother from the tiny Morgan County town of Sunbright.

“I am truly blessed, and I will sing the praises of Fort Sanders Regional and Methodist Medical Center and their staff until the day I die,” she said. “They were absolutely amazing. They were professional. They were personable. Very, very, very good people. The whole crew, the whole staff, everybody I came in contact with that day saved my life.”

She heaps even more praise on Dr. Woodward, who performed a thrombectomy that removed her clot at Fort Sanders Regional after Miller was transported by ambulance from Methodist Medical Center in Oak Ridge.

“He deserves special acknowledgment because he did such an amazing job,” she said. “My recovery would not have been what it was had he not done his job as well as he did, as quickly as he did. There are really not enough words to explain how grateful I am.”

“I am a stubborn woman, very strong-willed, very hard-headed and very in-



Angela and Lee Miller are grateful for the quick actions of Dr. Keith Woodward and Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center after Angela suffered a paralyzing stroke.

dependent,” she explained, adding that her home is nine miles from the nearest paved road and would be hard for an ambulance crew to find.

“I didn’t feel it was severe enough that I needed to call an ambulance. I figured it was a pinched nerve because there was no pain, and my speech and vision were OK. Everything seemed OK except my left arm and leg was numb. I thought, ‘Maybe I am just really sleepy. After all, it’s 3:50 in the morning. I’ll just go back to bed and worry about it when I wake up.’”

That wake-up call came at 9:46 a.m. when her youngest daughter, Sarah, arrived to find her mother “debating about going to the hospital.”

The “debate” ended and a 90-minute race to Methodist Medical Center in Oak Ridge was on. After two CT scans at Methodist, an advanced primary stroke center, revealed the clot, the results were relayed to the Comprehensive Stroke Center at Fort Sanders Regional. The hospitals are part of Covenant Health’s stroke hospital network, so Dr. Woodward and the Fort Sanders Regional stroke team were waiting when Miller arrived by ambulance.

Wheeled straight through the emergency department to the operating room, Miller was awake as Dr. Woodward inserted a small catheter tube through her groin

and guided a tiny vacuum device through the artery and into her brain where he suctioned out the clot.

“It took less than 15 minutes for the whole process,” said Miller. “I honestly believe that the only reason I am doing as well as I am is because of God and the doctors. God put the right people at the right place with the right qualifications and the right capabilities to put me where I am.”

She spent the next 24 hours in the neuro intensive care unit, and another 12 in a step-down unit before being released. The residual effects – slightly drooping shoulder, weak arm and leg and two fingers that wouldn’t move

– soon vanished with home exercises under the supervision of her children and grandkids.

Today, the only reminder of her stroke is that she tires easily, especially during hot summer days.

Of course, there was another reminder that will last a lifetime – a stern warning from Dr. Woodward and nurses who cared for her. “They said, ‘If that ever happens again, I don’t care how you do it, but you need to get here immediately because the game you played this time was Russian roulette,’” said Miller. “That’s not exactly how they put it, but that’s how I took it.”

She now says that if she ever has another stroke, there will be absolutely no waiting.

“I would not second-guess anything Dr. Woodward has to say,” she said. “That’s how much I trust his word. He didn’t placate, he didn’t pull punches, he didn’t mollycoddle. He was straightforward and that’s important, especially when it comes to something like a stroke. He was a godsend. He’s got miracle hands, and I can’t thank him enough. And the staff at both hospitals made me feel like they care. It was about the patient. It was about saving a life.”

Stroke? Two million reasons to B.E. F.A.S.T.

When it comes to stroke, there are two million reasons – and growing every minute – to BE FAST, says Keith Woodward, MD, neurointerventional radiologist with Vista Radiology at Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center, at the Comprehensive Stroke Center at Fort Sanders Regional.

“Almost two million brain cells die EVERY MINUTE during a stroke,” says Dr. Woodward. “But the faster I remove the clot, the faster brain cells stop dying, and the better the outcome. That’s why I tell all patients that if they have weakness in one arm or difficulty with speech to go to the emergency department immediately!”

Sadly, he says, patients often ignore those warning

signs or symptoms and wait, often resulting in permanent disabilities. “Unfortunately, that is all too common and patients wait,” he says. “Strokes do not hurt like a heart attack. That’s why education is so important.”

The American Stroke Association’s stroke awareness campaign has for years sought to educate the public about stroke using the acronym B. E. F.A.S.T. which stands for:

B – Balance. A sudden loss of balance or coordination.

E – Eyes. Sudden loss of vision in one or both eyes.

F - Face drooping. One side of the face is drooping or numb. When the person smiles, the smile is uneven.

A - Arm weakness. One arm is weak or numb.

When the person lifts both arms at the same time, one arm may drift downward.

S - Speech difficulty. You may see slurred speech or difficulty speaking. The person can’t repeat a simple sentence correctly when asked.

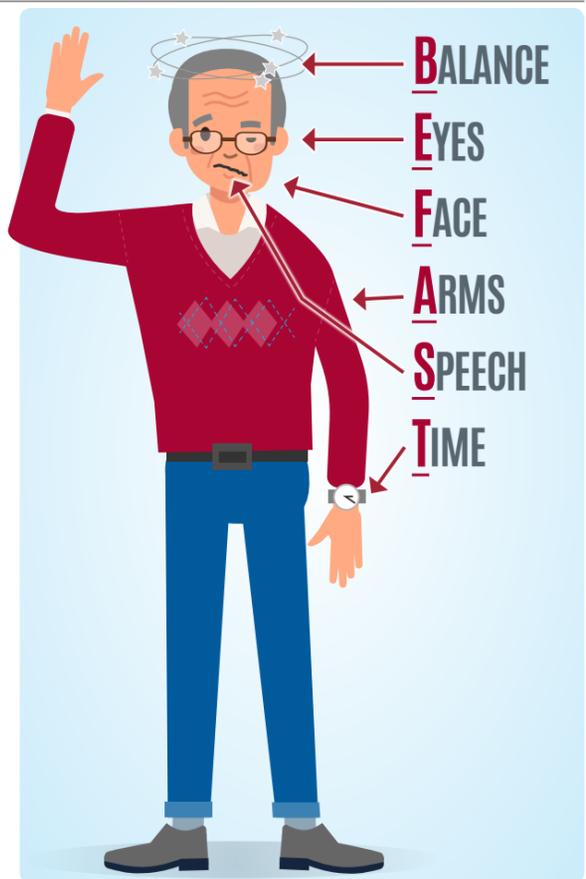
T - Time to call 911. If someone shows any of these symptoms, call 911 right away. Call even if the symptom goes away. Make note of the time the symptoms first appeared.

Stroke symptoms may happen suddenly. Each person’s symptoms may vary, but some symptoms are:

- Weakness or numbness of the face, arm, or leg, usually on one side of the body
- Having trouble speaking or understanding

- Problems with vision, such as dimness or loss of vision in one or both eyes
- Dizziness or problems with balance or coordination
- Problems with movement or walking
- Fainting (loss of consciousness) or seizure
- Severe headaches with no known cause, especially if they happen suddenly

Although doctors are able to save precious brain cells as far out as 24 hours, treatment is most effective when started right away. It takes, on average, 15 minutes for a physician to remove a blood clot, although Dr. Woodward says he’s removed one in as little as three minutes.



Stroke: Like It Never Even Happened.

No comprehensive stroke and rehabilitation center in our region does more to reverse stroke’s devastating effects than Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center. That’s why hospitals across East Tennessee refer their most complex stroke patients to us. We are home to the Patricia Neal Rehabilitation Center, East Tennessee’s elite rehabilitation center for stroke, spinal cord and brain injury patients.

Fort Sanders performs clinical trials and procedures for stroke not available anywhere else in our region.



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