

STUDY FOR WOMEN GETS TO THE HEART OF HEALTH RISK

By **Vicki Vass. Special to the Tribune**

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Just a little over a year ago, Mary Lou Dennison of Evergreen Park was a blissfully unaware, walking time bomb.

So when her daughter Debra Dennison of Homewood approached her about participating in the "Women Take Heart" screening offered at St. James Hospital in Chicago Heights, she brushed her off.

"I thought, why should I go? I had no shortness of breath, no pains," said Mary Lou Dennison, 60. "I thought it would be a big waste of time."

Finally, she agreed to take the screening. It was during the treadmill stress test, Dennison recalled, that the doctors first suspected a problem. "My legs were willing, but my heart wasn't," she said.

After a cardiac catheterization and two heart scans, doctors discovered that Dennison had 100 percent blockage in one artery and 95 percent blockage in the other.

On Nov. 11, 1992, she underwent double bypass surgery. She returned to her job as a steel pricer with Central Steel in Chicago in January. "Today I call my daughter 'my guardian angel.' I never would have given this a thought if it weren't for her," she said. "I was amazed this could happen to me."

Dennison is typical of women who suffer from [heart disease](#), say doctors, who term it a silent killer because women are often asymptomatic.

And while cardiovascular disease has decreased in men, it has increased for women. According to the American Heart Association, in 1980, 509,833 men died of heart disease in the U.S., while there were 490,143 deaths among women. In 1990, the numbers for men had declined to 447,900 and the death rate for women, though less than 1980, still outstripped that of men at 478,179. The turnaround in death trends started becoming evident in 1984, according to Liz Horan of the Chicago office of the Heart Association.

But despite figures like that, a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine in 1991 showed that women coming into emergency rooms complaining of chest pain are treated with angioplasty, bypass surgery and other procedures less often than men. The study found that in Massachusetts, the odds of undergoing angioplasty were 1/3 as high for women as for men. In a Maryland study, the test rate was 1/2 as high for women as for men. In a study, published in the journal's July 1991 issue, about chest pain.

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Such evidence prompted Dr. Arfan Al-Hani of St. James Hospital to take matters into his own hands.

"I began to wonder if I (as a doctor) was part of the problem," said Al-Hani, director of cardiology at St. James. "Have I been treating men and women equally?"

To fill the research void, he organized an intensive study of women and cardiovascular illness in 1992, testing just under 6,000 women at St. James Hospital in 57 days. Women from throughout the Chicago area and from 11 states who had shown no signs of heart disease came to participate in Al-Hani's "Women Take Heart" study.

Of the 5,932 participants, the average woman was 53 years old, 5 feet 4 inches tall, 161 pounds with a 33-inch waist and 42-inch hips. In the study, 86 percent were white, 9 percent black, 3 percent Hispanic and 2 percent other.

Each woman underwent a stress test and blood work, at a cost of \$600, which is the hospital's billing rate, not the test's actual cost. If needed, cardiac catheterization was performed, at a cost of \$1,300 per test. If more testing was required, a heart scan, at \$4,000 a test, was performed. Eighty percent of the cost of testing was underwritten by corporate sponsors, and the hospital paid for the remainder from its operating budget. The medical staff volunteered its time, and pharmaceutical companies donated some supplies.

"We wanted to identify what predisposes women to heart disease," Al-Hani said. "And women ought to have good health care."

According to "Women Take Heart" director Susan McKeigue, a major reason for doing the study locally was the demographic profile of the hospital's neighbors. Chicago Heights is essentially a blue-collar, middle-class community, while neighboring Olympia Fields is one of the wealthiest communities in the nation. Adjacent Ford Heights is one of the poorest communities in the nation. "This covers all aspects," she said.

In addition, she said, heart disease kills more individuals annually than all cancers combined. In 1991, according to the American Heart Association, 500,000 individuals were killed by heart disease, while 220,000 died from all cancers combined.

According to a 1991 study by the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, women suffer a higher risk of death after a heart attack than men. Yet the incidence of heart disease in women has not been studied before.

"Women have been excluded by studies before," McKeigue said. "We're finding women and men are different. We thought it was only a man's disease. It was implicit for somebody to do this study."

Said Dr. Louis Cohen, immediate past president of the American Heart Association, Metro Chicago: "From the data, there will be an added perspective about the prevalence of risk factors and women. It was a valuable service and will provide all of us with a good perspective."

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stress test and cholesterol profile.

During the screening, McKeigue said, they discovered 40 percent of the women had undiagnosed high blood pressure, and 45 women were diagnosed with heart disease. They also discovered 19 undiagnosed cases of diabetes.

Results are not complete, but McKeigue said researchers discovered that married women were more at risk for heart disease than single women of the same age, and married women with children also were more susceptible than their childless counterparts.

In the spring, St. James will host the First International Congress on Women and Heart Disease at the Ritz-Carlton in Chicago, McKeigue said. Dr. Al-Hani added that this is just the first screening of many, with a follow-up planned for next May or June.

"Heart disease is a very slow disease, which takes decades to express itself," he said. "We expect to follow these women for many years."

McKeigue said the plan is to follow these women with a screening every other year and add about 4,000 more, to bring the total up to 10,000.

"Originally we did no balancing of demographics," she said. "But this time we need to in order to develop a clear picture of American women."

In order to more accurately reflect the makeup of the general population, the next study will include another 2,000 African-American women over 45 years old, another 1,000 Hispanic women over 45 and another 1,000 women chosen at random.

Pat Shehorn, St. James executive vice president and chief operating officer, wasn't on staff when the project originated, but believes such a study is "long overdue," based on what's been discovered.

"Men describe having a crushing pain in their chest or a radiating pain down their arm," Shehorn said. "Women have silent heart disease. It is expressed differently. What we're seeing is more women die following a heart attack than men because the symptoms are missed."

At 80, Verneeta Gowens of South Holland had never experienced any heart problems. She saw an advertisement for the screening and decided to participate with a neighbor. "It was a spur-of-the-moment thing," she said.

During the exam, it was discovered that Gowens had a coronary valve blockage of 90 percent. "I was doing the treadmill when I felt faint. They had me stay and told me they had to take some (X-rays)," she said.

After a visit to her own doctor, Gowens had an angioplasty in July, in which a balloon is snaked into a blood vessel and inflated to decrease blockage. That was followed by bypass surgery in September 1992. "It was a relief to have it done," she said. "I had no symptoms."

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Today Gowens is still active, walking three to four times a week and working on her treadmill. She's dropped her cholesterol to 240 from 305. "It's genetic. My only sin is chocolate. I don't like butter, eggs or whipped cream," Gowens said. "I'm getting along fine. It was a good program."

Rhonda Doorneweerd participated in the screening with her mother, two aunts and a cousin. "We thought we'd make a day of it," the Orland Park resident said. At the time, she said she was out of shape and unable to complete the stress test.

Hospital personnel advised Doorneweerd to begin an exercise program and alter her diet. Since then, the 40-year-old said she has made some lifestyle changes, which included losing 40 pounds. "My whole family is eating differently. It opened my eyes," Doorneweerd said. "It opened the door to a whole new way of living for me."

For more information about the program, call 1-800-TKHEART.

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