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His teaching helps save his own life

Prominent heart surgeon turns to former students to remove blockages

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On April 1, Charlotte's Dr. Francis Robicsek was in Nicaragua helping a hospital build a pediatric heart center when an odd feeling came over him.

It wasn't chest pain, but one of the world's most prominent heart surgeons said he had a "hunch – and I always have good hunches."

Only hours after arriving in Managua, he caught a plane back to Charlotte. Two days later, he was having triple bypass surgery, an operation he'd performed thousands of times himself.

Robicsek could have gone anywhere for surgery, but he turned to a student-turned-colleague, Dr. Eric Skipper, to operate on his own heart at Carolinas Medical Center.

"In this hospital, I have trained every adult cardiac surgeon," said Robicsek, who came to work at CMC in 1956.

"I had Eric Skipper, but I wouldn't have hesitated having any of the others."

Robicsek had never had heart trouble, but at 81 he wasn't surprised to be the patient.

"I knew that one time I will be," the native Hungarian said in his still-thick accent. "Considering an alpha personality and my age, odds are a minimum 50-50 that you either will be operated on or die – or both – from coronary artery disease."

Blockages found

The day after he returned from Central America, Robicsek took a stress test that showed possible arterial blockages.

He chose a team of doctors from the Sanger Clinic, a group of cardiologists and surgeons he founded in 1968.

Dr. Paul Colavita, the cardiologist who succeeded Robicsek as Sanger president, would coordinate his care. Dr. Glen Kowalchuk, an interventional cardiologist would perform the diagnostic heart catheterization.

Skipper would operate, if necessary, assisted by Dr. Mark Reames, another of Robicsek's former students.

They scheduled the heart cath for 8 a.m. April 3. Robicsek made it clear that his younger colleagues should do whatever they felt was right – surgery or angioplasty to remove a blockage and implant a stent.

They found three blockages. That meant surgery.

"The next thing I knew," Robicsek said, "I woke up in the cardiovascular recovery room."

A 'terrific patient'

Skipper, 48, who has worked at CMC since finishing his training in 1994, was honored to be chosen by his mentor.

"Surgeons don't take surgery lightly when it's on themselves," he said. Although he said he wasn't nervous, Skipper did allow that there were "a few more eyes watching this one."

To protect his privacy, Robicsek asked to be listed as "Francis Roberts" in the hospital's patient directory. But those in the know gave him good care.

"I think I got a little extra," he said. "Maybe nurses smiled at me more."

The morning after surgery, Skipper found his patient sitting in bed reading "Finding Home in a World of War," the autobiography of Dr. John Waldhausen, a retired Pennsylvania heart surgeon.

For a physician known as a demanding perfectionist, Robicsek was a "terrific patient, believe it or not," Skipper said. "He made an effort to not necessarily be the always-in-control Dr. Robicsek."

Speedy Recovery

Normally, heart bypass patients take three to six weeks to return to work. Occasionally, a driven patient will make it back in two weeks after leaving the hospital, Skipper said.

Robicsek? "He got out of the hospital on the 12th and came to work on the 13th," said his administrative assistant, Theresa Johnson. "And he's been working every day since."

A pioneering surgeon and inventor, Robicsek developed a heart-lung machine in a friend's garage in the 1950s. He also assembled an extensive collection of pre-Columbian art. He has written five books on the topic and donated more than 1,000 works to the Mint Museum.

Before his surgery four weeks ago, Robicsek typically arrived at the hospital at 5:45 a.m. each weekday. He hasn't performed surgery since 1998, but he continued to scrub in three to four times a week as a teaching assistant for the residents. He also continued research and administrative work.

Since his bypass surgery, he's arriving later, at 9 a.m. At first, he went home in early afternoon, when his wife, Lilly, picked him up. But since mid-April, he has been staying for eight hours – still "part time" for Robicsek.

At 81, he's one of the older patients to have bypass surgery, Skipper said. "Most people are in their 60s and 70s."

Next week, Robicsek will leave for previously arranged visits to Munich, Venice and Barcelona to attend a board meeting, receive an honor and give a lecture.

He thinks his heart trouble is over. After all, he trained the surgeon himself.