

# Cardiac Rehab is good for the heart

Moving Grays Harbor  
By Maryann Welch

It's my guess that many of you are just like my husband, Jim, and I – we take for granted our ability to live an active lifestyle. This fall that assumption was tested when Jim was faced with open heart surgery to replace a defective aortic valve. Jim's functional capacity post-surgery made us both wonder whether he could ever return to normal daily activities let alone physical work. It was shocking to him to see what a few weeks of inactivity do to muscle mass and stamina.

Fortunately for us, Jim's doctors had referred him to the Cardiac Rehabilitation Program at Grays Harbor Community Hospital. Four weeks after surgery, Jim met with Gail Genzel, RN, the program's director, to be evaluated for participation in medically supervised exercise. He's now set up to gradually increase his activity over a 12-week period while wearing a heart monitor.

When I accompanied Jim on a visit to the cardiac rehab facility I saw a small, cramped room (Gail reports that a new facility is in the works) that features four walls entirely covered with Polaroid photos of hundreds of program participants over the past 18 years of the program's operation. This is obviously a small program with a big impact! The exercise equipment in the room would be familiar to anyone who has visited a fitness center. However, a counter is filled with heart monitor screens that are closely watched by an ever-present nurse. As I observed Jim use the treadmill and the stationary bike it was quite reassuring for me to know that someone could watch how his level of activity was affecting his heart.

Gail herself designed the program for the hospital 18 years ago and has been its director ever since. Her goal is to help people who have experienced heart disease, a heart event or surgery to realize that even with their condition exercise is feasible. Don Hay, a "graduate" of the program, recalls being "afraid I'd break myself" exercising. With Gail's support and encouragement Don was able to become physically active and make the nutritional changes that ultimately have made him feel better than he has in years. Over her tenure Gail has seen many "graduates" achieve a level of fitness that enables them to do the things they enjoy.

Each person's goals are different and range from walking with a spouse to taking a cruise or just remaining independent. Some even learn to like physical activity! Gail does stress that "individuals are not cured once they complete the 12 week program." The heart, after all, is a muscle that needs to be used to remain strong.

After completing the program, some participants choose to continue on a maintenance schedule that is not as closely monitored, but still incorporates periodic heart function testing. I met two vibrant women who have kept up their exercise regimen for 3 years. They both look 10 years younger than their professed mid-80's and are obviously committed to maintaining and improving their fitness. One of them mentioned that she has been able to return to mowing her own lawn.

In addition to the exercise incorporated into each visit the program also offers an educational component that focuses on teaching the pharmacology, nutrition, and disease processes involved in cardiovascular disorders. Gail has found a fun strategy for incorporating information in to each visit by posting a "Question of the Day". The question topics generate

conversation among the participants as they exercise.

Jim's medical team encouraged him to take advantage of the cardiac rehab program and there was never a doubt in his mind that he would be an active participant. Gail indicated that doctors and hospitals are very supportive of the program and readily refer appropriate patients. However, Gail reports that the national average for participation by those who can benefit is only 35-40%. Don Hay shared, "Initially, I did not want to go and kept putting it off. When I finally decided to make the time commitment it turned out to be the best thing I ever did for myself."

As we approach the end of 2008, Jim is progressing nicely in his recovery and claims that soon I will not be able to keep up with him! Thanks to a great medical team and the structure and support of the Grays Harbor Community Hospital's Cardiac Rehab Program, Jim is headed toward being a "new" man in the New Year. My hope for all of you is that you will do as Don Hay and Jim are doing and take any opportunities that arise in 2009 to improve your own health!

*Maryann Welch is the recently retired director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department.*

*If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at [moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us](mailto:moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us) or visit our web site at [www.ghphss.org](http://www.ghphss.org).*