

Mayo Clinic 150th Collection of Stories

O21: External Drive: Charles' Artificial Heart

Intro: In the world of medicine, miracles happen every day. People endure and overcome serious illnesses that, not long ago, were considered untreatable. A man named Charles Okeke [oh-KAY'-kay] is one such miracle. He is one of the first ever to have an artificial heart implanted at Mayo Clinic after his own heart failed.

Video

Audio

TRT 3:33 Voice of Vivien Williams	For almost two years, Charles Okeke lived in a Mayo Clinic hospital tethered to a machine.
Charles Okeke Had artificial heart	"There is something beating that is not a part of me but is attached to me."
Voice of Vivien Williams	A completely artificial heart.
Charles Okeke	"You can feel it. It's not a little thing. It's pounding. If I opened my mouth it was very audible. Bum-bum, bum-bum, bum-bum."
Voice of Vivien Williams	Years ago, Charles had a heart transplant because a condition called cardiomyopathy caused his own heart to fail. Over time his new heart failed too.
Eric Steidley, M.D. Mayo Clinic cardiologist	"He developed what's called chronic rejection and that's where the heart muscle gets weak and people go back into congestive heart failure. So Charles was very sick when he showed up at our hospital. Charles was going to die unless we did something."
Voice of Vivien Williams	Mayo Clinic cardiologist Dr. Eric Steidley says Charles could not, at that time, have another transplant. His immune system was so revved up that it would reject almost any new organ. What they did to keep him alive was implant the artificial heart. First the surgical team removes the right and left ventricles, or the two main pumping chambers. They also remove the heart valves. Then they attach small tubes to the upper chambers and two main vessels. Finally, they attach the artificial pumping chambers. An external machine, or

	driver, powers the heart.
Charles Okeke Had artificial heart	"It might have taken me a couple weeks before I was able to put my hand to my chest and acknowledge that ok, I have an artificial heart."
Voice of Vivien Williams	Then the wait began. Charles' immune system had to settle down to allow for another transplant. Days, weeks, months passed.
Charles Okeke	"You have to have a strategy. Its a long day."
Voice of Vivien Williams	To pass the time Charles read, surfed the web, exercised and he got to know hospital staff very well.
Charles Okeke	"Some of the best laughs I've ever had were in the hospital. Some of the best conversations I've ever had were in the hospital."
Voice of Vivien Williams	Then, after more waiting, a portable driver allowed Charles to leave the hospital. He was going home for the first time in over a year.
Charles Okeke	"you guys have made this a great experience for what it was."
Voice of Vivien Williams	Home to his wife Natalie and three young children.
	"Thank you guys, cheers to you all."
Voice of Vivien Williams	But it was a temporary visit. Charles couldn't stay on the artificial heart forever. So after a time at home, he went back in the hospital where, finally, he received the gift of life he after two years on the artificial heart.
Charles Okeke	"The great thing I have learned in all of this, how my life has changed is that I think I know how to simplify my life. Life to me is really simple. Life is about service. That's it."
Eric Steidley Mayo Clinic cardiologist	"I learned to be a better physician taking care of him because I wanted to radiate that hope to my other patients who maybe don't have that sort of resilience that Charles did. Because I know it was the way to get through some tough times."
Voice of Vivien Williams	For Charles, those tough times are over. He's living a life of faith, love and family.
Charles Okeke	"I feel like I'm the most blessed person on earth, some of the things that have happened to me in my life have proved to me that my life is charmed, this I know."

Anchor tag:

The Internet is rich with health and medical information. Dr. Seime says it's important to go to reputable sites. Look for sites that end in .gov or are from credentialed health care institutions such as Mayo Clinic.

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