A cautionary tale

Novelist/ND professor writes gripping account of heart attack

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SOUTH BEND -- In the fall of 1991, novelist William O'Rourke was chubbier than he had ever been in his life. His high blood pressure was going untreated, even though his family tree is heavily populated with heart patients, most prominently his mother, who had had a bypass.

His wife began leaving not-so-subtle hints around the house: clippings of New York Times obits of middle-age men who'd dropped dead.

"I was a heart attack waiting to happen," O'Rourke says.

And it did -- on Oct. 26 in Notre Dame Stadium, just before kickoff of the USC game.

O'Rourke, the author of four novels and four non-fiction books, has written a new book about his heart attack, subsequent hospitalization, cardiac rehab and ongoing treatment for heart disease.

"On Having a Heart Attack: A Medical Memoir"

By William O'Rourke University of Notre Dame Press $18.00
"On Having a Heart Attack: A Medical Memoir" is being released Saturday by University of Notre Dame Press.

A professor of English and creative-writing teacher at ND, O'Rourke says one of his goals is to "fill a void in the literature" by describing exactly what it feels like when a blood vessel supplying the heart muscle becomes clogged.

The result transforms the familiar, dry list of symptoms -- chest pain (which affects two-thirds of people having a heart attack, but not O'Rourke), pain radiating to the left arm, faintness, sweating, nausea, shortness of breath -- into a riveting reading experience.

During an interview, O'Rourke says his recollection of the events of that day is so vivid that he found himself slipping into the present tense when he wrote about them some 13 years later.

"Some experiences are indelible -- first loves, first moments with the woman one marries, the birth of a child," he says. "This was my first near-death experience. It was not difficult to recall."

O'Rourke is married to Teresa Ghilarducci, an economist at Notre Dame and a noted expert on pensions. The couple's son, Joe, was born in 1990, just 15 months before O'Rourke had his heart attack at age 46.

The two events made O'Rourke both a late father and an early heart attack survivor. They are forever "yoked together" in his mind, he says, and also in the emotional tone of the book. He's compelled to reflect soberly on mortality at the same time that he is discovering the burdens and joys of caring for a toddler.

During his 10-day stay in what is now Saint Joseph Regional Medical Center, South Bend, "Melancholia certainly was my almost-daily visitor, as evidence by my train of thought. If I had died, Joe would have no recollection of me, other than the most dim and buried," he writes.

O'Rourke, of course, didn't die. The clog in one of his coronary arteries was dissolved with a drug called TPA (tissue plasminogen activator).

A few days later, after treatment for a hospital-acquired infection, he was given an angioplasty, the increasingly common procedure in which a thin tube is threaded into a vein in the leg and snaked all the way to the site of the clot. A balloon on the tip of the wire is inflated, widening the vessel.

In the 14 years since his heart attack, O'Rourke has been a conscientious, health-minded survivor.

He has lost weight and kept it off (25 pounds or so below his high of 203) and adopted a more healthy diet. He works out regularly and takes daily medications to thin his blood and lower his cholesterol.

The lifestyle changes and medicines, however, have given him "good-looking blood" but have not stopped the progression of his heart disease.
Early last year, a routine checkup and stress test, enhanced with an injection of a radioactive isotope, revealed a possible problem at the site of his heart attack. A follow-up angiogram showed that severe blockage had returned, including several spots where the vessels were 80 percent shut.

He decided to have a quintuple bypass graft, but only after carefully weighing counterarguments; many experts advocate diet, exercise and medication over surgery when arteries are narrow but not clogged.

"There are two camps about this," he says.

A former political columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times, O'Rourke is a keen observer of the world of medicine.

At a time when most medical writing seems to either trumpet medical miracles or vilify the profession for fatal shortcomings, O'Rourke finds a middle ground, neither triumphal nor harsh.

"I wanted to describe the typical experience and to be realistic about what I was feeling at the time," he says. "I am grateful for all doctors have to learn to do what they do."

Some of his commentary is wry. He notes the phenomenon of "harem professions" in specialty practices such as cardiology and dentistry: the offices consist of a small core of male doctors surrounded by a much larger group of women who do their bidding.

Other points are cautionary. O'Rourke recounts how doctors neglected to warn him of the excruciating pain that occurs at the moment when the clot-busting TPA succeeds in eating through the clog (it works 60 percent of the time).

A nurse tells him at the last minute as if she's confiding "a secret, or at least, the truth." The pain, when it comes, is like "I'm being burnt alive while hurtling through space." The blood is flowing back into the starved heart muscle, what doctors call "reperfusion."

The second lapse occurs a few years later, as O'Rourke is taking several heart-related medicines.

On two occasions, separated by several years, he crumbled to the bathroom floor after getting up in the middle of the night to urinate. He split his chin in the first fainting spell, requiring stitches. The second left the side of his face black and blue. Doctors don't know the cause.

Only later, when he happened to read the fine print on his cholesterol medicine, did O'Rourke discover that dizziness upon rising from a lying position is listed as a known side effect.

"Patients need to be as self-educated as they can be," he says. "They have to be their own partisan."

While his family history is mostly bad when it comes to heart disease, there is one bright spot that gives him hope.
His mother was 59 years old when she had her bypass operation, the same age he was last year when he had his.

"She's still alive at 84," he says.

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