

HEART HERO 2019: RAJESWARI GOVENDER

Logistic Clerk

Nominated by Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa

"After a stroke and open-heart surgery, I want to encourage people to pay attention to their bodies and get regular checks."

My name is Rajeswari Govender, I'm 35 and the eldest of three children. Heart disease is hereditary in my family and at the young age of 34 my dad passed away from a third heart attack.

In February 2014, I had a mild stroke and experienced a temporary loss of sight in my left eye and a temporary paralysis in my left arm and leg, resulting in loss of balance and slurred speech. This came as a complete shock to me and my family as I was the first member of the family to have a stroke, especially being as young as 31. Thankfully, the doctors at Entabeni Hospital were quick to start the necessary treatment and I slowly began to regain strength and the use of the affected parts of my body. Unfortunately, I have endured some nerve damage in my left leg which resulted in a 30% reduction in strength.

On further investigation, the doctors discovered that I have a rare heart condition known as an atrial septal aneurysm and a patent foramen ovale (PFO) which is a birth defect. Whilst recovering from the stroke, I began treatment for this now discovered heart condition. Since then, I have been for regular check-ups just to make sure there has been no enlarging of the aneurysm and that my heart remains stable.

But then from December 2018, I noticed my health was deteriorating. Palpitations with short intervals began while I was asleep and my body started swelling. I consulted my cardiologist and after further testing they discovered that the aneurysm had enlarged drastically, causing the PFO to leak. A quick decision had to be made about surgery for closure of the defects as I was at higher risk than before.

Even though this was an intense surgery, as there were two defects which needed to be repaired, I agreed to it and on the 18th of February this year I underwent open-heart surgery. I'm glad to say that the surgery was a huge success even if the recovery process is a rather slow and painful one.

Over the last five years, I have begun to educate myself and to share this knowledge with family, friends and anyone I come into contact with. I have even found a common interest with the Heart & Stroke Foundation, where I attended member meetings and engaged with other survivors. I continue to strive to encourage people to pay close attention to their bodies and do the regular tests, such as cholesterol, high blood pressure, sugar levels, etc... as these are contributing factors to the causes of strokes and heart attacks.

It is amazing how life can change so much, especially after an illness. The question is, how does one perceive this change? Does one wallow in self-pity or does one stand and go? Personally, I never let anything wear me down. Despite my challenges, I chose to make my life worth living and stuck to it. I could not have done it alone and am blessed with an incredibly supportive family and understanding and loving friends. I believe that medicines do help but having immense support from families and loved ones works twice as better and faster.