

AMH Paramedic on the Other Side of Stroke Treatment

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Kelly McCreary didn't want to believe it was happening again. The 34-year-old wife, mother and Alton Memorial Hospital paramedic was having stroke symptoms for the second time in a year.

The first time McCreary had a stroke, on Nov. 18, 2012, she was visiting her parents when she started feeling like she was in a tunnel and wasn't sure what was wrong. Her husband, Richard, a fellow paramedic at Alton Memorial Hospital, checked her heartbeat, and they both decided to head home to Bethalto.

“On the way home, the right side of my face was numb, and so my husband drove straight to Alton Memorial,” McCreary says. “By the time we got to the hospital, I could not get any words out.”

McCreary was having an ischemic stroke, which results from an obstruction within a blood vessel that supplies blood to the brain. The clinicians at Alton Memorial Hospital, a Primary Stroke Center, immediately went into action.

McCreary had a CT scan, and tPA — a clot-busting drug — was administered before she was taken via helicopter to Barnes-Jewish Hospital for further treatment.

“After the tPA, which needs to be administered within three hours from the first sign of a stroke, I was able to talk again,” she says. “I had some memory loss but was told the best way to rehab your brain is to problem solve, and so I was back at work about a week later.”

As a paramedic, but more importantly as a person with a family history of stroke, McCreary knew what she was up against and that she could likely have another stroke. In her own family, her grandmother had her first stroke at the same age as McCreary and died after her third stroke at age 43. Her father has had eight strokes and multiple heart attacks by the time he was 50. He is doing well but remains cautious -- like his daughter.

“When my grandmother had her strokes, they didn’t have the information they do now about stroke and the treatments,” says McCreary, who says she is eating better, exercising more, taking medication and seeing a neurologist regularly.

But she still didn’t expect to experience stroke symptoms again so soon.

It was during a dinner out last October with her husband and their three daughters — ages 5, 9 and 13 and whom they share from both a previous marriage and their own — when McCreary started having an odd feeling all over her body. She knew once again that something just wasn’t right.

This time her husband called 911, and McCreary was suddenly experiencing a weakness on her right side, her pupils were sluggish and her speech was slurring.

As soon as she arrived at AMH, they immediately administered the tPA and she was again transported by helicopter to Barnes-Jewish Hospital.

“I just thought, ‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’” McCreary says. “When they did an MRI, it didn’t show a stroke the second time, but my doctor says they could not be

certain because she couldn't see the symptoms. Everything happened so fast the second time and, fortunately, we did the right thing by calling 911."

Stephanie Watson, RN, the AMH Stroke Center coordinator and an Emergency Department staff nurse, agrees.

"Kelly has a strong family history of stroke, and because she is one of our paramedics, she has a better understanding of what is happening to her," Watson says. "We are so grateful that she is willing to share her story and get the word out that time is so critical when a person experiences signs of a stroke."

Watson encourages people to call 911 if they believe they are having a stroke and get to a hospital as quickly as possible, adding that they should not try to drive themselves.

"I know I am so lucky to have received the care I did by everyone at both hospitals, particularly by the fire department, EMTs and nurses," McCreary says. "All of my co-workers were awesome."

Receiving care at AMH was very comforting for McCreary and her family.

"This is my other family," she says of her co-workers. "I knew they were going to take care of me."