

Patient of the Month: Charles Fazio's recovery from heart bypass surgery, kidney failure, and financial crisis

By Nathan Sheon, student, Bethesda Chevy Chase High School | March 28, 2014

Patient of the Month is a new regular feature from Real World Health Care to illustrate the challenges and successes of the American health care system through the experiences of inspiring survivors.

Charles Fazio wasn't sure how he could survive another health crisis.

Just three years after his four-way heart bypass surgery, he developed end stage kidney failure. In the worsening economy, he had lost his job as a traffic signal technician in Norfolk, Virginia and had since become too sick to work. On top of his serious health problems, Charles' financial worries were overwhelming.



Charles Fazio

"It was like after having all of these other things happen, now I have to deal with this, too," said Charles. "It was a big shock."

Charles' disability benefits had not begun to come in and he had to sell off his possessions to afford his medical expenses. Eventually, he lost his home and found himself homeless for several days.

"One night I stayed in my mom's nursing home. I went in to visit her and I pretended like I just fell asleep in the chair next to her," Charles said.

In short, it had been a rough few years, to say the least.

Charles was treated at Sentara Norfolk General Hospital and received dialysis for a year and a half at the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Medical Center. Completing the process for Medicare allowed him to afford his dialysis treatments and living expenses.

Then, one day in 2012, Charles' regular doctor appointment morphed into an overnight kidney transplant. "I was scared to death," Charles said. "I didn't know what to expect. I had read up on everything thoroughly, but when the time comes, you really just have to face it."

By 4 o'clock the next day, he had a transplant kidney.

Charles continued treatment and testing at the VCU Medical Center after his operation. His recovery went smoothly, but he still required numerous medications and immunosuppressants. Again, he couldn't afford the copays.

That's when doctors and social workers introduced Charles to the HealthWell Foundation, a nationwide non-profit providing financial assistance to insured patients who are still struggling to afford the medications they need (and sponsor of this blog).. Charles was given a grant that enabled him to afford his medications.

"The grant I got from [HealthWell] took a lot of worry off of my back, a lot of tension," Charles said.

With his financial stress reduced, Charles was better able to emotionally cope with his condition. "The help I got from Norfolk General, the VCU and [HealthWell] was the turning point for all of my frustrations, for feeling sorry for myself," he said.

Now, Charles is doing quite well. At a recent annual check-up with his doctors at the VCU, his blood tests came back looking good. His transplant kidney is holding up well and his medication is stable. "You never know how you're doing, even though you're dieting and doing what your doctors are telling you," he said. "In the back of your mind you're asking, 'How am I doing?' and only a doctor can tell you."

"But they said I'm doing well, and I feel good too."

Charles is optimistic that his series of unfortunate events may now be in the past. He is recovering well and doing his best to stay healthy in his eating habits and his lifestyle. "When the weather's nice, I try to take a walk once a week, and I hold on," he said.

One step at a time, Charles. We're all glad you're here.

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