

# The Heart of the Matter



**Homeopathy helps a woman with irregular heartbeat**

by AMY ROTHENBERG, ND, DHANP

WHEN ABIGAIL FIRST CAME TO SEE ME FOR ATRIAL FIBRILLATION—AN IRREGULAR heart rhythm—I was uncertain about whether to treat her. As the central organ of circulation that works for most of us with utter predictability and reliability, the heart is also subject to sudden turns of events. Some, as we all know, can be life threatening. I wanted to first review her cardiac workup and have the support of her cardiologist. And I wanted to take extra special care to understand her underlying family history and the history of her current problem, as I would for anyone who came to see me for such a serious condition.

Abigail was distraught about her diagnosis. Her doctors were urging her to take anti-arrhythmia and anti-anxiety drugs, but she was concerned about the side effects, since she'd had bad experiences with conventional medications in the past. She was hoping a homeopathic remedy might help instead.

I had seen Abigail on and off as a patient for twenty years, but it had been six years since her last visit. Her past list of complaints had included chronic urinary tract infections, dry and irritated skin, and a significant set of family issues that were exacerbated by and probably also contributed to anxiety, low self-esteem, and insecurity. She had done well with the homeopathic remedies *Staphysagria* and *Silica* at different times in her life.

### **Small stature, painstakingly precise**

The first thing one would notice about Abigail was her diminutive size. She had always been small boned, but when she came to see me this time in the fall of 2005, she seemed to be slipping away. At 4 feet 11 inches and 90 pounds, she took up very little space. Her skin was close to transparent, pulled taught over the outline of her prominent jaw. Her attire was what I would call “perfect casual”—meaning neither fancy nor expensive but put together with an eye toward exact size, color choice, and accessories. Her hair was pure white now and cut in a flattering bob that gave a carefree feeling to this otherwise highly-strung, sixty-year-old, retired office manager.

Abigail's large, wide-opened eyes were brown and cool, and her smile never quite reached them. Her voice was a bit wavering and quiet, but her specific word choice

to describe her symptoms and her current life situation were painstakingly exact. Her effort to tell me accurately and faithfully *precisely* how she felt was nothing short of heroic. On a day when I had more patients or less patience, I might find a visit with Abigail trying.

Abigail told me that with the exception of some dry skin, her body and spirits had been good these last six years. Her three

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adult children were settled and doing well, and her new marriage to a man a few years older was a source of terrific support and pride. After years in a stressful and difficult relationship, this change was welcome.

About a month before our visit, however, Abigail had begun to experience irregular heartbeats, especially at night. Perhaps because she was so thin, or more likely because she was very well-tuned in to her own body through regular exercise and weekly yoga classes, she was immediately aware that something was amiss in the region of her heart. After visits to her primary care physician and a cardiologist, Abigail was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation.

### **What's atrial fibrillation?**

Atrial fibrillation is an irregular heartbeat that begins in the top portions of the heart. A problem with the electrical system creates a kind of shudder, which interferes with the normal rhythm of cardiac pumping. Atrial fibrillation can put a patient more at risk for stroke because blood may collect in the heart and form clots that can be pumped out into the arteries. This can also cause a heart attack.

Many things can cause atrial fibrillation such as high blood pressure, history of heart attack or other heart conditions, lung illnesses, hyperthyroidism, excessive intake of alcohol or marijuana, or overuse of stimulants like caffeine or nicotine. For some people, however, there is no known reason why atrial fibrillation begins.

The most common symptoms of atrial fibrillation are lightheadedness, shortness of breath, fatigue, palpitations, pain in the chest, and fainting.

### **Conventional treatment**

An electrocardiogram or EKG, which tests the electrical system of the heart, helps a doctor to diagnose atrial fibrillation. An echocardiogram gives additional information about how the heart is pumping and what state the patient's valves are in.

Conventional medical treatments depend on the patient's symptoms, the reason for the atrial fibrillation (if known), and other risks the patient may have for stroke. Treatments may include cardioversion, where a small electrical shock is given to the heart to stimulate it back to a more normal rhythm, and/or anti-arrhythmia drugs to attempt to bring the heart back to its normal rhythm. Many patients are also placed on blood thinners or aspirin to help reduce the risk of stroke.

If cardioversion and medication do not work, doctors may recommend cardiac ablation, a procedure where small sections of the heart are destroyed thereby forming scar tissue to interrupt the irregular heart-beat. A pacemaker may be needed afterward to recreate normal rhythm.

### Homeopathic treatment

Or ... the patient might find their way to a homeopath! In my experience over the past two decades, I have found homeopathic treatment to be helpful in many patients with atrial fibrillation. I have had to refer some patients for more invasive conventional procedures when homeopathy did not help them. But I have also had patients come to me after procedures like cardioversion or anti-arrhythmics didn't work or didn't give lasting results, and over time, homeopathic remedies have offered them a welcome reprieve from atrial fibrillation.

With all my patients, I aim to understand the whole person; I take the case, striving to see the atrial fibrillation in the

context of the person's overall physical, mental, and emotional health. There certainly are homeopathic medicines that tend to be used more frequently for people with heart problems, but I do not limit myself to those medicines. I cast my net wide, trying to grasp all elements of the person's life so that I can best find a remedy that will help the whole person.

Once I give a remedy and have allowed it time to act, I assess its overall impact on the patient. Of course, I want to see that the atrial fibrillation has been less frequent, less intense, and/or shorter in duration with each episode, but more than that, I want to see that other things that limit the patient have also improved. This might include better digestion and sleep, or less anxiety and depression, depending on the individual. And for all patients, I want to see improved focus and energy.

### Thumping: why me, why now?

Abigail described her atrial fibrillation as a "sort of thumping" in her chest, which was worse at night. It was very distracting and

greatly impacted her ability to sleep. It happened most every night and sometimes persisted through the morning. With less sleep, she was tired and more likely to feel her symptoms. So, as you can see, she was caught in a cycle of worsening atrial fibrillation that was leading to strong symptoms of anxiety. Her anxiety was definitely worse at night in bed, but it extended throughout the day as well. She wondered if she would die from this; she wondered why this was happening to her, especially now, at this time in her life when things were finally going well. She worried about her heart, her health in general, her husband's health, her children, an upcoming move—anything was fair game. She felt the anxiety in her stomach or in her chest or all over, and it did seem to make the atrial fibrillation worse.

When the atrial fibrillation really got going, she felt light-headed and off balance. She did not have any history of cardiac issues and had taken good care of her physical body over the years.

## Homeopathy & Heart Conditions



Can homeopathy help such cardiovascular conditions as high blood pressure, atherosclerosis (clogged arteries), irregular heartbeat, angina, or congestive heart failure? There is much that homeopathy can do to address these issues directly; and there is plenty that homeopathy can do to help inspire and stimulate people to make other necessary changes to reduce the risk of cardiovascular illness.

As with any chronic complaint, however, homeopathic remedies are prescribed for particular people, as opposed to particular diagnoses. Five patients with atrial fibrillation might each receive a different remedy, depending on their particular symptoms and how they experience the problem as individuals. While it is true that certain remedies like *Nux vomica*, *Lachesis*, *Glonoine*, *Cactus grandiflorus*, and *Spigelia* are used more frequently for patients with heart conditions, any of a wide number of homeopathic remedies may be indicated (as was true in the case of Abigail who happened to be helped by *Kali silicatum*).

Of course, it should go without saying that the homeopathic treatment of people with cardiac conditions is not the realm of self-prescribers and should only be attempted by experienced, trained homeopaths working in coordination with the patient's cardiology team. The biggest dangers here lie in missed diagnoses and the loss of valuable time in addressing treatable conditions.

So if you have a friend or loved one with a heart condition, refer them to a trained homeopath in their area. While we can't help every condition, some extremely common cardiovascular complaints can be addressed with good effect using gentle, effective homeopathic remedies.



### Earmuffs, gloves, & afghans

Abigail was very chilly, her extremities in particular. She had begun to wear earmuffs and gloves, though we were barely into a not-very-chilly autumn, and to use a heating blanket to warm her bed (turning it off before climbing in). Abigail especially felt cold in her back; she was always aware of any breeze or moving air and would often sit in a chair wrapped in an afghan to keep the cold from getting to her back. She perspired profusely especially on her head, hands, and feet. She had always had a propensity for getting swollen glands; over the years they'd hardened, leaving chains of small knotty nodes under her jaw.

Her appetite was off, especially when she was having the atrial fibrillation, she did not particularly want to eat. She had always had a tendency toward constipation, going several days between bowel movements. It was as if she just didn't have the energy to push the stool out. She often bloated up and felt like her abdomen was swollen in the day leading up to a bowel movement.

She had some shortness of breath which she attributed to being out of shape, due to not exerting herself as it seemed to aggravate her atrial fibrillation. Her fatigue was marked and worsening from the lack of sleep, the lack of exercise, and the anxiety. She just wanted to lie down and rest all the time.

### No chitchat

Abigail was careful in her speech—tentative is the word that comes to mind—and also painfully self-effacing (recall the *Staphysagria* prescription); I found myself speaking in a lower and lower voice and more slowly, too, so as not to overwhelm her. I asked my questions, she gave me her clearly thought-out answers. There was virtually no chitchat.

Abigail told me that her patient, caring husband would listen to her at great length and seemed to really appreciate her thoughtful care and careful thought. They soon would be moving to a warm island community (should help any condition!), and making plans and anticipating the monumental changes were very stressful for Abigail. However, they were working together and trying to take it one step at a time.



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Abigail was as organized as they come. As always, she brought me her medical records in perfect order, three-hole punched in a binder with typed labels on the dividers, and clearly marked folders for certain documents she did not want to put holes in. This made my review of her recent labwork and studies easy and straightforward, something I always appreciated about Abigail.

### Everything is context-dependent

Of course, I also realized that Abigail's organized manner was a characteristic that could help point to a particular homeopathic remedy. With any such characteristic of a patient's temperament, I need to perceive *why* the person is like that—why she is so organized and conscientious, why being like that is important to her. Differ-

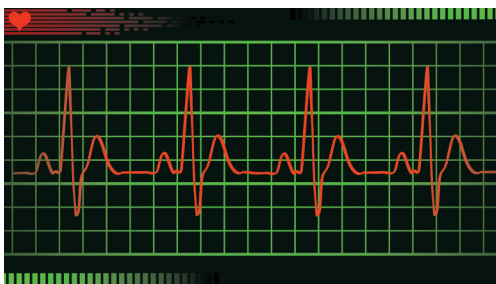
ent "remedy types" are careful and conscientious for different reasons. For instance, people who benefit from *Baryta carbonica* will be conscientious because they are deeply insecure; if they can have everything look "together," perhaps no one will be able to tell. *Calcarea carbonica* types are irritated by things out of place; many people needing this remedy will feel almost relaxed as they tidy up and organize possessions, papers, or a particular area, like the fridge or the CD collection or the kids' toys. *Nux vomica* patients will want order and a specific place for everything because they have issues with control and want things their way and only their way.

It's important to remember that it is not just the symptom or the person's temperament that has meaning or value to the homeopath. Rather, everything we are told by the patient or that we observe during the case-taking is context-dependent; understanding what causes the patient to be that way and what they may derive from that tendency or symptom will help lead us to a prescription that can help the *whole* patient, including their chief complaint.

For Abigail, her need to be organized stemmed from deep anxieties that drove her to stick to the rules. She had a kind of rigidity to her life, and she put undue pressure on herself to adhere to what she deemed to be correct. Indeed, I believe her conscientious speech was another example of this—wanting to get it "just right." She needed to create strict order out of any chaos and build a life where surprises and unpredictable things would be less likely to happen. Even so, if a strong-willed or strong-minded person with a clear opinion and a loud voice came along, she would acquiesce. She did not like discord and avoided it at all cost.

### First remedy choice

My initial inclination in choosing a homeopathic remedy for Abigail was to head right back to the *Silica* because it had helped her in the past, and she had retained many of her *Silica* qualities especially in the emotional realm (her conscientiousness) and in her physical general symptoms (her tendency to be chilly, especially in the extremities, and her need to wrap up, as well as her easy perspiration). So I repeated the *Silica* 200c



## Good Advice for People with Atrial Fibrillation

In addition to being closely followed by a cardiologist and getting homeopathic treatment by a trained professional, here are a few important things that I recommend to patients with atrial fibrillation:

- 1 Quit smoking, including removing exposure to second hand smoke.
- 2 Eat a diet good for the heart including lots of fresh fruit and veggies, fish, legumes (beans), and high fiber cereal and grains. Use olive oil liberally.
- 3 Attempt to add regular and aerobic exercise into the schedule after being cleared by your physician.
- 4 Work toward getting cholesterol and blood pressure into the normal ranges.
- 5 Try to address and alleviate underlying causes of stress, and practice stress reduction activities.
- 6 Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and marijuana, as these can increase the incidence and severity of atrial fibrillation.

Patients with atrial fibrillation will often ask me if there are nutritional supplements or botanical medicines that will help. I tell them that the evidence on the efficacy of the use of fish oil and Vitamin C in the treatment or prevention of atrial fibrillation is inconclusive, although magnesium is sometimes used intravenously in the treatment of acute episodes. While I do generally recommend supplements, I individualize the selection and dosages for each patient.

and asked her to return in three weeks.

Unfortunately, when she returned, I learned that the remedy had no effect on her atrial fibrillation or her anxiety, and little to no effect on anything else, although perhaps she was moving her bowels a tad better. I assessed the *Silica* as an incorrect prescription and went to work finding a remedy that was better suited to her with her current complaints.

### A seldom-prescribed remedy

As I studied Abigail's case, I noticed a remedy coming through the repertorization that I have not often prescribed: *Kali silicatum*. Those who need one of the *Kali* salts on a constitutional level (e.g., *Kali carbonicum*, *Kali nitricum*, etc.) typically share common *Kali* symptoms: needing a lot of structure and doing well with rules, while being wracked with anxiety and worry. But since *Kali silicata* also has a *Silica* component, *Kali silicata*'s indications also capture the symptoms of this patient that were so helped by *Silica* in the past, such as her weakness, constipation, and chilliness. In addition, it was as if Abigail were wasting away, and this is a kind of emaciation that *Kali silicatum* is known for. She had this insidious weakness and fatigue, but like any good *Kali* person, she forced herself to get up and work, to take care of business and keep going, owed in great part to her strong sense of duty.

I prescribed *Kali silicatum* 12c, one pellet once a day, and asked her to return to me in a month. I had felt comfortable giving Abigail *Silica* in a higher potency (200c) since she had done well with it before; but I decided on a low potency with repeated doses for *Kali silicatum* because Abigail had a kind of fragility about her.

### Good news this time

Abigail phoned me a week after she began taking the *Kali silicatum*. She said she felt better overall, her fatigue had lessened and her energy was higher, and she was sleeping better. She had not had any strong symptoms of the atrial fibrillation for that week—which was quite a marked improvement—though she still felt a sort of uneasiness in the region of her heart. She just wanted me to know that she thought we were on the right track.

That was a very heartening phone call

to receive as I knew that if she had not gotten results soon, her cardiologist would surely be requiring her to try stronger conventional measures; I noted this in her chart and looked forward to seeing her in the office a month later. When she returned, the improvements had persisted. She had had just two nights of atrial fibrillation, over the whole month—quite a dramatic shift from before taking *Kali silicata* when she was experiencing it nightly and sometimes into the day. Her sleep was better, she felt less stressed out. She continued to struggle with constipation and being chilly. I decided to keep her on the *Kali silicata* 12c daily for awhile, mostly because she was continuing to improve and I did not want to rock the boat.

### Lasting results, grateful patient

It has been more than two years now since Abigail started treatment to address atrial fibrillation, and she is very pleased with the results. In these two years, she has had a few weeks where the atrial fibrillation seemed to crop up again just a bit, especially during times of great stress, but never to the degree she had been experiencing it before homeopathic treatment. I have given her *Kali silicata* in higher potency as the need arises. Over this time, she has also gotten better at recognizing the atrial fibrillation as a symptom that is related to her stress, and instead of escalating into severe anxiety, she will take a deep breath and try to figure out how to cut the stress down. She is ever grateful to homeopathy for once again helping her find a better place of balance.

So with Abigail, I relearned the lesson that treating atrial fibrillation with homeopathy is a worthwhile endeavor. Each time I have a success treating someone with a cardiac condition, I feel more inspired to treat others. With our aging population, I should have no shortage of opportunities!



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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