

As a police officer I saw death every day. My potential killer was my own heart

EXCLUSIVE
By Gary Wright



POST-OP: Gary in Bart's Hospital, London, in 2020 after one of many surgeries

I SHOULD be dead. That might sound stark, but it's true. Thirteen years ago, aged 27, I died twice. Looking back now, it's bittersweet to be part of a tragically small group of survivors of a heart condition usually diagnosed post-mortem – after it's already killed you.

Top-flight sportsmen and the super-fit are especially prey. Who can forget the shocking footage of footballer Christian Eriksen being resuscitated on the pitch during the Euros in 2021? Or medics working frantically to save Fabrice Muamba back in 2012 after he collapsed on the pitch at White Hart Lane? It took 78 minutes but, incredibly, he survived. Likewise, Luton Town captain Tom Lockyer who was "technically dead" for nearly three minutes after a similar collapse on the pitch before Christmas. Tragically, in April Italian footballer Mattia Giani died on the pitch – having fallen to the ground only seconds after taking a shot at goal.

Back in 2011, I was a fit, healthy and active police officer, playing pretty much every sport going, from cricket to tennis with a bit of skiing in between.

I'd recently married and was in my "invincible" era – nothing could stop me. Though I dealt with death on an almost daily basis at work, it was somehow detached from my own reality. It was a part of what I did, not something that would ever confront me personally.

The first time I suffered an episode was a mundane evening after a round of golf, in my bathroom of all places. Trying to recall it is something of a blur – like remembering what you did as a two-year-old.

Someone else can tell you what happened, and you can put the images together to make a video of it in your mind, but the actual memory is vague, with blurred edges and soft focus. Coming round, I remember my wife Naomi standing over me as I scrambled about on the bathroom floor, reaching for something, anything, to pull myself up while knowing that something was entirely wrong.

I'd cracked my head on the way down as well and, to put it bluntly, I was a mess. I genuinely can't remember anything else about it, though, other than the feeling of total

dread that I can't adequately describe. Morbidity? Maybe. A presence of something deeply foreboding? Probably. And when it happened again, a couple of days later, I simply have no memory of it at all.

Again, I've been told what happened (an undignified faceplant into my lunch at the pub, by all accounts), but after that all I remember is what the consultant told me after I'd been rushed into my local Casualty department: "There's significant damage to your heart."

Those six words changed everything. What 27-year-old has damage to their heart, and why?

What followed, after extensive screening and testing, was a diagnosis of Arrhythmogenic Right Ventricular Cardiomyopathy (ARVC), a genetic, progressive, incurable and life-limiting disease of the heart muscle. It's thought to affect just one in 5,000 people, where the heart muscle is replaced by both scar tissue and fat.

No more sport, they said, and – certainly –

no more policing. I've been a cricket nut as long as I can remember and, when James Taylor of Nottinghamshire and England was diagnosed with the exact same condition as mine in April 2016, after some serious issues of his own, I felt numb.

Here was someone at the peak of physical conditioning, renowned for his levels of fitness, who was similarly affected.

I'd almost compartmentalised my own mental misgivings with regard to the condition at that point yet, there it was, slap bang out in the open again. Just seeing how indiscriminate the condition was honestly made me feel sick, that everything was real and that the dangers were always there, lurking in the background.

Those same cold feelings washed across me only this week when I read about Ben Youngs, the England scrum-half with a record-breaking 127 caps.

He announced last month that he had undergone heart surgery following cardiac

Having been diagnosed with ARVC, a degenerative condition typically striking super-fit athletes, cricket-mad copper Gary Wright was forced to alter not only his career but his whole outlook. Rather than admit defeat, he embraced his second chance at life

issues similar to mine, and I can remember well the feelings he described, fearing that he was staring death in the face, that life as he knew it might be over.

ONCE again, it hit me that as fit and healthy as someone may appear on the outside, their heart could be letting them down so catastrophically on the inside, a ticking time bomb. As a result of my own condition, I was forced to retire from the police when I was 29, and, I've got to be honest, I felt totally lost.

For me, policing wasn't just what I did, it was a big part of who I was and though I was not yet 30, it was all over.

Not only that, I'd also been told I had to completely change my lifestyle – sport was out, so were most forms of exercise.

The brutality of ARVC is that, the harder your heart works, the more degenerative it



LOVING LIFE: Gary Wright, main, with his children Sully, left, and Florence, at family coffee stall in Ramsgate



BRIGHT EYED BOBBIE: Gary Wright, above, as a young constable with Kent Police in 2003. Top, with wife Naomi

their life. Sarah is incredible; the way she talks about Richard, the way she deals with what has befallen her, and the fundraising and awareness she raises.

Genuinely, I'm in awe at how she has reacted to such a tragedy.

ARV is a genetic condition, and my own children will have to have regular screenings at Great Ormond Street for the entirety of their childhood but their prospects are really good for not developing the condition.

It is inevitable, though, that there will be more stories to come where there isn't such a happy ending. It would be an understatement to say that hearts are complex organs. They're working 24/7 and the number of conditions affecting them are more common than is widely known.

Today every time I hear of someone collapsing in a marathon, or on the school playing field, those same feelings of dread are dredged up from deep within.

Yet there are so many charities working wonders with screenings and education, particularly for young people, and there is so much more awareness to be shared.

With the Paris Olympics in full flow, and the football season kicking off again soon, that inevitability is tempered somewhat by the amazing work being done by various charities. From Cardiac Risk in the Young (CRY), to the Cardiomyopathy Association and, on a larger scale, the British Heart Foundation, there are ongoing efforts to both prevent and cure the condition.

Back in 2011, when I was told, "There's some significant damage to your heart", it could have been the end but, thankfully, it was the beginning of a wild and wonderful new adventure.

Here's to many more years of writing, and to heart conditions like mine being a thing of the past in the very near future.

● *After The Storm* by GD Wright (Aeon, £8.99) is out now. Visit expressbookshop.com or call [Express Bookshop on 020 3176 3832](tel:02031763832). Free UK P&P on orders over £25



is. Put simply, hard exercise could be a killer. It took a well justified kick up the backside from my wife to get back on track.

We looked at what we could do to fill the emptiness that ARVC had created in my, and our, lives and, in between operations where I had various devices implanted into my heart (defibrillators and pacemakers) under the wonderful team at Barts Hospital in London, my wife and I took the plunge and dove head first into something we'd only ever dreamed of; we bought a coffee shop overlooking Ramsgate Harbour.

It was glorious! Six months working when the sun shone, six months off when the cold came, no stresses or strains on the ticker and looking out to sea every day.

It was there that I found myself dreaming up stories, and I found myself realising that there was another ambition burning brightly deep within.

To write something, I'd always loved writing from a young age, but had never thought of it as anything other than something pro-

essionals did. Honestly, though, as soon as I began putting pen to paper it was life-changing... Life-affirming, even.

It was the exact outlet that I had been looking for to fill the void and, when Covid came along, and I had to keep the coffee shop closed so that I could shield, I put all of my energy into creating my first novel.

It all stemmed from the sea, how innocuous it can seem, but how powerful it can be just beneath the surface. But the book, *After The Storm*, was also the opportunity for me to use my years as a cop, including most recently a Family Liaison Officer for Kent Police. I had finally found a way of using that experience, much as I missed it, as a positive bridge into what I saw as my new world.

It's a story all about how one child's drowning has ripple effects on the families involved and on the wider community as a whole. Staring out at the sea every day, missing my old life, had been the catalyst, and I'm so incredibly proud of the result.

So, this really isn't a tale of woe on my

part, nor is it one where I'm resentful.

Not in the slightest. If anything, I'm so very grateful to still be here, to have the chance to write my stories and I am gripping hold of that chance with both hands and riding the waves wherever they take me.

And not only that, since this all happened, my wife and I decided we really wanted to have kids.

It took seven years of trying but, as we were about to look at other options, our little girl, Florence was born, followed a couple of years later by her brother, Sully.

Life isn't just good, it is great, and I'm so grateful for my lot.

As for me, I've been lucky to meet some special people who are similarly affected and, also, to speak to some who have been bereaved as a result.

My friend, Sarah Butcher, tragically lost her husband, Richard, in 2011, aged only 29. Richard was a professional footballer, playing for Macclesfield Town – another young, super-fit person cruelly taken in the prime of