

Brain surgeon works with cardiologist to repair cortland woman's heart

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Rita Hernandez-Wright, center, with her cardiologist Fred Ling, M.D., and husband, Nate, right.

A Cortland woman with a genetic abnormality in her heart is back to her normal routine thanks to the seemingly unusual pairing of a brain surgeon and cardiologist at the University of Rochester Medical Center.

Neurosurgeon Babak Jahromi, M.D., Ph.D., and interventional [cardiologist](#) Fred Ling, M.D., combined their expertise to restore [heart](#) function for Rita Hernandez-Wright, 58, who endured several months of frightening episodes that led her to believe she was having heart attacks.

“My chest would start to get really tight – like my insides were being squeezed – and I would get scared and go to the hospital,” said

Hernandez-Wright, a former police officer in Jamaica who retired from a position working with domestic abuse victims in Cortland County. “Each time I went they said it wasn’t a heart attack.”

Testing at Cortland Memorial Hospital and St. Joseph’s Hospital in Syracuse showed her heart was enlarged and two fistulas in her heart. Fistulas are abnormal connections within the arteries. Doctors recommended she seek specialized treatment at URM’s Heart & Vascular Center.

“She was born with two abnormal communication pathways between the arteries and pumping chambers of her heart,” said Ling, M.D., director of the URM Cardiac Catheterization and Electrophysiology Lab. “The blood was being stolen away from the heart muscle because of the congenital abnormalities.”

Ling determined coil embolization was the best way to correct the problem. This involved inserting tiny coils into the artery to cut off the blood flow and allow the heart to function properly. And he turned to a colleague in Neurosurgery to assist in the procedure, which was performed April 4.

“This was a challenging fistula because of its high flow and drainage directly into the heart. Precise coil placement was critical to avoid potential stroke, otherwise the coils might become dislodged from the heart, and be pumped elsewhere into the body,” Jahromi said.

Hernandez-Wright, a breast cancer survivor, and her husband, Nate, listened closely as Ling explained the procedure, using a model of the heart to show them what was going to happen.

“It was an unusual diagnosis that required an unusual team, but they had a plan. They were so thorough when we talked about it,” she said. “When

it was time, every person in the room working on me knew their role and I put my faith in them.”

Hernandez-Wright is a co-pastor with her husband at God’s Lighthouse of Praise Church. They have five children and raised five others.

This isn’t the first time cardiologists tapped into the expertise of URMC’s Neurosurgery team. Two years ago, Jahromi worked with cardiologist Chris Cove, M.D., in a first-ever procedure to destroy a gnarly mass of abnormal blood vessels in a young woman’s heart.

Jahromi and Cove injected “medical superglue” directly into the mass in the beating heart, shutting off the arteriovenous malformation, which are more often found in the brain. The procedure was challenging because Jahromi had never worked with a moving organ and Cove had never considered using Onyx, a glue-like substance, in the heart.

Provided by University of Rochester Medical Center

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