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Teamwork Credited in Saving Life of Heart Attack Victim

San Rafael, CA – January 22, 2010 – A San Francisco man who suffered symptoms of a severe heart attack while visiting in Marin is doing well today, due to the expertise and experience of a Marin emergency dispatcher, a highly trained San Rafael Fire Department paramedic unit and a skilled cardiac team at Marin General Hospital.

Kevin Monaghan, 61, considered driving himself to the hospital but the dispatcher, Judy Jeong, advised him to wait for the ambulance that had already been dispatched.

Monaghan's decision wait for the paramedics proved critical, as he suffered a cardiac arrhythmia while en route to Marin General, a condition that could easily have led to cardiac arrest and his death while endangering other drivers. Paramedics were able to restore his heartbeat with an on-board defibrillator and deliver him safely to MGH, where he underwent an emergency procedure to unblock a clogged coronary artery.

Monaghan was having dinner with friends in San Rafael's Peacock Gap neighborhood on November 21 when, around 9:30 p.m., he fell ill.

"At first I thought I had a little indigestion, and then I thought I had food poisoning, then I started sweating and had nausea," said Monaghan, who had no previous history of heart disease.

A few minutes later he felt a little better, but then "I started having chest pains. At that point I called 9-1-1."

Dispatcher Jeong, who has been at the Marin County Sheriff's Office Communications Center since May 2007, took the call. While another dispatcher sent a fire truck and ambulance to Monaghan's aid, she kept him on the line.

"He mentioned that he might just drive himself to the hospital," said Jeong. "I really believed he was having symptoms of a heart attack, so I told him, instead of canceling the call now, you can do that when they arrive."

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Within five minutes, just before the arrival of San Rafael Fire Department paramedics Ryan Goodwin and Garret Northern, Monaghan said, “I realized I was having a heart attack, because the pain continued to increase.”

The paramedics quickly prepped Monaghan, hooking him up to a 12-lead electrocardiogram (EKG), which indicated he was suffering classic symptoms of a heart attack due to a severely blocked coronary artery – the blood vessel that supplies oxygenated blood to the heart muscle itself.

Relaying the EKG results to Marin General allowed the hospital to summon a team capable of performing emergency angioplasty, a procedure in which a small balloon is threaded into the blocked artery and inflated to push aside the obstruction and restore blood flow to the heart.

Monaghan said that MGH Cardiologist Brian Strunk, MD, “was having dinner when the call came in. He arrived at the hospital about the same time I did.”

Hospital records show that Monaghan’s obstructed coronary artery, often called the “widowmaker” because its blockage is the cause of so many deaths, was 100 percent closed. It was opened 81 minutes after onset of his symptoms and 36 minutes after his arrival at the hospital.

This is significantly better than the national goal (promoted by the American Heart Association and other groups) of opening a patient’s blocked artery within 90 minutes of the arrival of the patient at the hospital.

San Rafael Fire Department Battalion Chief Jim Lydon, who was at the dispatch center when Monaghan’s call came in, said the case illustrates an important lesson:

“Call 9-1-1 if you suspect you are having a medical emergency. It is better to call and have us check you out. In a case involving a heart attack, the emergency team can be already assembled and at the hospital. This greatly decreases the time in which there is a lack of oxygen to the heart.”

Moreover, “There is danger in driving yourself to the hospital, because you may experience cardiac arrest while behind the wheel, which could endanger others. Even as a passenger, you could go into cardiac arrest and no one could do anything to save you.”

Dispatcher Jeong, a former police officer, said, “It’s hard to be objective about your symptoms. The best advice is to get professional help. Professionals are trained to determine what kind of care you may need.”

She credited the teamwork in the Monaghan case, saying, “I work for a great county and it was a team effort. Everyone is so highly trained – dispatchers, the fire department, the medical team, all of them. Everyone did what they needed to do, and everyone had a part in Mr. Monaghan living.”

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Monaghan's last word: "From this I learned that you may feel able when talking to 9-1-1, but things can get a lot worse fast. In my case, there would not have been enough time to get myself to the hospital. My advice: let the system work."

Today, Monaghan says he feels fine and has received a clean bill of health from his cardiologist.

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