February 2016

MEDIA RELEASE

Cardiologists’ advice helps patients save their own lives

Would you be shocked to learn that chest pain is one of the least common symptoms of a heart attack?

A team of cardiologists is determined to hammer home the message that the main symptoms to look out for are indigestion, sweating, feeling clammy, chest pressure, discomfort, arm ache, numbness, breathlessness and nausea and not, as commonly thought, chest pain.

Dr Jonas Eichhöfer, Dr Ahmed Farag and Dr Ranjit More from Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust say acting fast when these symptoms arise, gives patients the best chance of survival.

As February is National Heart Month, the Cardiologists are eager to stress that seeking medical help quickly can mean the difference between life and death.

Every year 70,000 patients in the UK have a heart attack. A heart attack means a vessel that supplies blood to the heart is blocked.
Dr Eichhöfer, 51, who lives in Lytham and is originally from Germany, has worked as an Interventional Cardiologist at the Lancashire Cardiac Centre at Blackpool Victoria Hospital for the last seven years.

He and his colleagues see around 1,000 people a year with suspected heart attacks and of those patients, around 800 need to have stents (small tubes that let blood flow through arteries) fitted at the centre.

Dr Ahmed Farag is a Cardiology Registrar who previously trained in Blackpool and now works in Manchester.

The Cardiologists are passionate about raising awareness of heart attacks and have been working with the Trust, Blackpool Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and Fylde and Wyre CCG to raise further awareness through a campaign called Think! Why A&E?

The campaign website features valuable information about symptoms and what to do if a person has a heart attack.

In recent months Dr Eichhöfer has worked closely with Dr Farag to collect data from patients to try to improve outcomes. They have asked patients what caused them to delay seeking treatment and many said they didn’t think their symptoms could be those of a heart attack.

Together they developed a campaign aiming at alerting and educating the public to the early signs and symptoms of heart attacks and the importance of calling for help early.

Dr Eichhöfer said: “We are very passionate about this. Changing people’s perceptions of what a heart attack is could save a lot of lives.

“Very small changes to what patients and staff think could make a big difference.

“We want to get across that it’s ok to ask for help. We’re trying to turn patients into life-savers.”

Dr Farag said: “The problem is that some people sit on their symptoms for hours - sometimes days - without recognising that they are having a heart attack.

“This can put them and their hearts at serious risk. The quicker the patients recognise their symptoms and get in touch with the medical services, the quicker they can get access to the appropriate medical treatment which sometimes can be life-saving.”

Dr Eichhöfer said it is vital that everyone is aware of the symptoms and that they seek help as a matter of urgency.
He explained: “The most common symptom of a heart attack is what patients describe as indigestion.

“Tightness in the chest, jaw and neck is common and feeling sweaty and clammy are also major symptoms.

“If you have a heart attack it is usually caused by a blood clot blocking an already narrowed artery. The narrowing occurs over time due to a fatty substance stored in the wall of the arteries.

“These thickened areas are called plaques. When these plaques break open and blood gets in contact with the inside of the vessel wall a clot forms. This can block the vessel and cause the heart attack.

“Although most patients presenting with heart attacks are 40 years and older, we do occasionally see patients in their 30s.

“It’s down to genetics, family history and factors such as smoking, diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

“The longer the wait, the more damage to the heart is caused. The quicker you can open a blocked artery up and put a stent in, the less the risk of the patient dying.”

Dr Eichhöfer and his colleagues place the stent by making a small opening in a blood vessel in the wrist or groin (upper thigh). Through this opening they thread a thin, flexible tube called a catheter.

The catheter is placed in the coronary artery and allows for a small wire to cross the blockage. Over this wire a tiny stent on a deflated balloon is placed in the artery. When the balloon is inflated it pushes the blockage aside. The balloon is then deflated and taken out of the artery. The stent stays in place to ensure the blood flow.

Dr Eichhöfer said: “When someone comes in with a heart attack we aim to open the artery and place a stent within 90 minutes.

“We have a fantastic team that provides this emergency service 24 hours a day, seven days a week for 1.75 million patients in Lancashire and South Cumbria.”

Stents can be fitted when a patient is awake and many people can go home the same day.

Cardiology is different to cardiothoracic surgery in that Dr Eichhöfer and his colleagues operate from the inside of the heart arteries. In cardiothoracic surgery the patient’s chest is opened up and heart bypass surgery is performed.
Dr Eichhöfer added: “We weigh up what the best long-term option for the patient is and act accordingly.

“At times of heart attacks we usually use stents to open the heart arteries rapidly.

“If someone has symptoms they should call 999 or ask someone to call for them. People should not try to drive if they have symptoms.

“Heart attacks can kill you or leave you with lasting damage. You must act fast as every minute counts.”

For further information on the Think! Why A&E? campaign and heart attack advice go to http://whyaande.nhs.uk/heartattack

-Ends-

Photo captions:

Consultant cardiologist Dr Jonas Eichhöfer in the Lancashire Cardiac Centre at Blackpool Victoria Hospital.

Dr Ahmed Farag.

The Think! Why A&E poster warning people of the symptoms of a heart attack.

-Ends-
For all media enquiries please contact Ingrid Kent, communications support officer, on 01253 956 875 or Ingrid.Kent@bfwhospitals.nhs.uk