

Case study – Lionel Levine, 63, Essex



Lionel Levine's remarkable story serves as a stark reminder of how sudden cardiac arrest can strike anyone, at any time.

Lionel and his wife Susan were on an airplane returning from a relaxing holiday to Lanzarote, in April 2012, to celebrate his retirement when in a split second everything changed.

About an hour and half into the flight and without any warning signs or symptoms, Lionel suffered a sudden cardiac arrest aged 63.

By chance, a doctor happened to be on board and he, along with the flight attendants, frantically fought to keep Lionel alive – performing CPR and using an AED on him.

The airplane was re-routed and landed in Faro, in Portugal.

Lionel was rushed to hospital there and spent four days in intensive care before being stabilised and returning home to Essex around a week later.

He has since been fitted with an implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) and has made a full recovery.

Here in a moving interview with Arrhythmia Alliance, Lionel and Susan talk about that dramatic day and Lionel's incredible recovery.

Meeting Lionel Levine just over seven months after his sudden cardiac arrest it is almost impossible to believe you are in the presence of someone who came so close to death.

Now back to full health and with a renewed vigour for life, Lionel and his wife Susan both know he is incredibly lucky to be alive.

Lionel's heart had to be restarted three times after he suffered a sudden cardiac arrest during a flight and but for the actions of those on board and the presence of an AED things would most likely have been very different.

"I am so lucky," says Lionel. "I have basically been given a second chance at life."

"My heart stopped for a total of 27 minutes. The people on board that plane and the AED they used on me saved my life - it is as simple as that."

Lionel has no recollection of what happened on April 3rd 2012, or for at least a few days before that, just a few memories from a 'wonderful holiday' with Susan remain.

"I can't remember anything," he continues.

“I do have flashbacks to parts of the holiday and I remember what a great holiday it had been.

“I had given up work in January after deciding enough was enough and I wanted to enjoy myself. So Susan and I decided to go to Lanzarote. I was very relaxed, I had no worries.

“What happened was a complete bolt out of the blue.”

For Susan, the memories are all too clear.

“Our flight back to the UK had been delayed by 24 hours and we’d stayed in another hotel,” she recalls.

“Finally we got on the plane and I remember we were about an hour and a half into the flight when the air hostess brought the drinks trolley around.

“Lionel went to get me some money to pay for my coffee and then I just heard this gurgling noise. I turned to look at him and could tell instantly something was very wrong.

“His head was back and the colour had just drained out of him. It was terrifying.

“I grabbed the air hostess and said ‘please, my husband, my husband’ and with that I was taken away from him as they worked on him to try and keep him alive.”

Lionel had suffered a sudden cardiac arrest brought on by the arrhythmia, ventricular fibrillation. By chance, a doctor was on board the flight and he, along with trained cabin crew, worked on Lionel for around half an hour – administering CPR and using an AED - while the airplane was diverted and landed in Faro, Portugal.

“I was in total shock,” Susan continues. “It was a complete blur. I remember the air hostess holding me down in the seat and explaining they were working on Lionel but it was so hard because I couldn’t see him.

“They were giving him CPR and used a defibrillator on Lionel which ultimately saved his life.

“The doctor who had happened to be on board came up to me and said that Lionel was alive but I didn’t see him again until we were in the hospital.

“I honestly thought he didn’t have a chance. I had seen the colour just drain out of him and I thought I had lost him.”

An ambulance was waiting at the airport to take Lionel straight to Faro Hospital where he was rushed into intensive care.

“Nobody could speak to me for about an hour and a half because they were still working on Lionel and there was a language barrier with some of the doctors which made things harder.

“Finally I was taken up to see him and it was awful. He was on a ventilator.

“I just cried and cried, I couldn’t believe what had happened and I couldn’t stay with Lionel at night so I had to stay in a hotel nearby.

“I was in complete shock and it wasn’t until about two days later I started to come out of it.

“They told me to keep talking to Lionel so I did, every day.”

A few days later Lionel regained consciousness

“I was so sore,” he recalls.

“My ribs were fractured when CPR was performed on me and I couldn’t sleep. I was feeling very strange with all of the medication I was on.

“When I woke up in Portugal I said to Susan ‘let’s go out tonight’. I had no idea what had happened.”

After a week in Faro Hospital, Lionel was flown back to the UK and returned straight home to Essex.

After seeing his consultant at London Bridge Hospital Lionel was recommended for an implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) which was implanted in May.

He has since gone on to make a full recovery.

“I am so lucky to get another chance. I owe my life to the people who helped save my life and to that AED. It saved my life, there’s no doubt about it.

“You don’t think it is going to happen to you. I didn’t think it would happen to me, but it did.

“If it is going to happen, it is going to happen and that’s why AEDs need to be readily available.”

Lionel beat the odds in surviving his sudden cardiac arrest and had it taken place elsewhere, where an AED was not on hand, the story could have been very different.

“Had our airplane not been delayed we would likely have been at home when this happened and I don’t think I would have got an ambulance in time,” Susan says.

“Lionel was in the right place at the right time but not everyone who suffers sudden cardiac arrest will be that lucky.

“AEDs should be everywhere – shopping malls, hotels – anywhere there are people so that they are there ready to use in an emergency – just like there was in Lionel’s case.

Since his ICD was implanted Lionel’s remarkable recovery continues.

“Life has pretty much returned to normal,” he says.

“Obviously at first you are worried something could happen again – that is the big concern. But when I saw my cardiologist I understood the procedure and the device and I was completely reassured.

“It was really simple procedure, it was done under local anaesthetic and I came out the same day. I felt a little sore but other than that I’ve had no problems.

“My heart has already gone out of rhythm and the ICD has put it back so I feel completely reassured that if it happens again it will be there to help me. It is a wonderful machine and it is saving my life.”

And on life together now Lionel and Susan are both clear.

“We are going to live life now. I have been given a second chance and I’m certainly not going to waste it.”

And Susan agrees.

“Looking back I don’t know how I got through it, it was awful. But I got Lionel back and I couldn’t ask for more.

“We are both very lucky and determined to make the most of life.”