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The doc who walks the talk; And rappels down buildings and takes on adventure races -- all to prove a point about how stroke is killing us

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There is little Dr. Tim Watson won't do to let people know about one of North America's biggest killers.

On Wednesday, Tim, a stroke neurologist from Calgary, and his wife Doone Watson rappelled down the four-storey building of the Heart and Stroke Foundation in Kensington to raise awareness of stroke.

The couple made it safely to the sidewalk, but the stunt is just a taste of the 50-something couple's adventures to come later this month.

June is Stroke Awareness Month and the Watsons are on a mission to get people active, and to improve their own at the same time. For the past four months, they've been training -- running, kayaking, swimming and rappelling -- in preparation for Primal Quest, a 10-day adventure race in Montana that begins June 21.

Competing as Team Brain Attack, the couple plans to cover 800 kilometres of Montana's rugged wilderness by foot, bike and kayak, as well as climb mountains and rappel off cliffs.

"We needed something as big as Primal Quest to get us out of the North American 'deathstyle,'" says Tim. "With our demanding careers taking a toll on our health, we realized that we needed outside interests before one of us was rushed to the emergency room with a stroke."

The Watsons are attempting their dream adventure race after five years of training and participating in smaller races such as the seven-day Costa Rica Coast to Coast Challenge and the Inca Trail Marathon in Peru. To celebrate Doone's 50th birthday last year, they ran a 80-kilometre ultra marathon in California.

They weren't always in peak physical condition.

Now 55, Tim is in much better shape today than he was five years ago. He was an active mountaineer and runner in his 30s and early 40s, but by the time he reached 50, a hectic career and neck surgery had slowed him down.

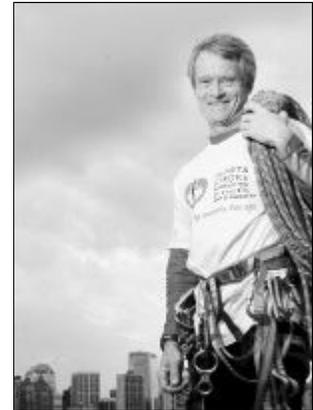
"I was at the point that I could barely lift my left arm and could never get a good night's sleep because of the pain," he says.

His 50th birthday was a wake-up call for the Watsons.

"Tim had two options: become a couch potato or get his active life back," says Doone, now 51. At the same time, she decided to change her "deathstyle" by downshifting her full-time veterinarian career to a part-time practice.

The importance of a healthy lifestyle -- regular exercise, a low-sodium diet, controlling blood pressure, weight and alcohol consumption and the importance of quitting smoking -- is hammered home every day when Tim goes to work.

IMAGES



Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald
 Dr. Tim Watson, a Calgary stroke neurologist, pauses for a photo before he and his wife, Doone Watson, rappelled off the Heart and Stroke Foundation building in Kensington.

As one of 11 stroke neurologists at Foothills Hospital, he has witnessed many lives abruptly interrupted and shattered by stroke. It is one of the leading causes of acquired adult disability in Canada, leaving 50 per cent of its victims disabled for life.

Stroke survivors often need months of rehabilitation, re-learning how to chew and swallow their food, how to talk clearly and walk without losing their balance. Many stroke survivors also experience significant personality changes, which often bring additional strain to family ties.

"Although I am constantly encouraged by the continuing advances in stroke care and rehabilitation," says Tim, "prevention is still key."

To that end, he helped spearhead the Alberta Provincial Stroke Strategy, which has resulted in high-quality stroke care across the province.

"Tim has been instrumental in collaborating with all health regions and improving their stroke services that ultimately saves lives," says Diana Krecsy, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Alberta, NWT & Nunavut. She and Tim lobbied the Alberta government on behalf of the health regions to fund stroke awareness, education and services.

As a result, the provincial earmarked \$20 million in 2005 and \$22.5 million in 2008 to support the strategy's initiatives, such as targeted stroke education for all health professionals and equal access to acute stroke treatment across the province through a "telestroke" network.

The network, a type of telemedicine, instantly connects rural health regions through telecommunications with stroke experts in Calgary and Edmonton, allowing for "rapid diagnosis and treatment for people in their own communities," says Krecsy.

Tim led the telestroke initiative for southern Alberta, ensuring that Albertans rushed to hospitals in Lethbridge, Medicine Hat or Drumheller have 24/7 access to a stroke neurologist at the Foothills.

Telemedicine is vital to the outcome of stroke patients when one considers the limited three-hour window for reversing the effects of stroke by injecting a clot-busting drug called tissue plasminogen activator into patients who are good candidates for tPA.

It's interesting to note that during the last 10 years, Alberta has become a centre of excellence for stroke care, education and research. Nearly 90 per cent of all stroke training fellowships in Canada are done at the Foothills Hospital in Calgary and at the University of Alberta Hospital in Edmonton.

The Calgary Stroke Program at the Foothills Hospital is world-renowned for its brain-imaging expertise, exploring various scanning technologies that provide specific information on where a blood clot or bleeding in the brain is occurring. And the program is well on its way to becoming an international leader in clinical trials evaluating the efficacy of emerging stroke treatments.

The Watsons hope their active lifestyle will prevent them from ever needing to access those services.

"That's why we're out there training through rain or snow, even when we're tired," says Tim.

With their Primal Quest adventure, the Watsons will raise awareness about stroke through word of mouth and brochures, but mostly by example.

"It doesn't matter when you do it, or where you do it," says Tim, "but it's important to do something for your health -- every day."

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What You Should Know About Stroke

- Stroke is the leading cause of severe acquired adult disability in Canada; 300,000 Canadians live with the emotional

and physical effects of stroke.

- Stroke can happen to anyone, from infants to the elderly. And although the risk doubles every 10 years after the age of 55, one third of strokes occur under the age of 65.

- There are two types: An **ischemic stroke** occurs when the blood supply to the brain is blocked by a clot in an artery, which happens in 85 per cent of all stroke cases. Less common, but more deadly, is the **hemorrhagic stroke** that results from a ruptured vessel, most often caused by untreated high blood pressure.

- High blood pressure is the leading risk factor, but can be treated and controlled through proper diet, regular exercise and sometimes medication. Other risk factors for stroke include diabetes, smoking, high blood cholesterol, family history of stroke, obesity, existing heart conditions, stress and excessive alcohol consumption.

- Brain cells start dying as soon as a blood vessel in the brain ruptures or a blood clot in the brain interrupts blood flow. For every minute without blood flow to the brain, 1.9 million neurons and 14 billion synapses are destroyed.

- Recognizing the symptoms of a stroke is key to surviving a stroke and to reducing the chance of life-long disabilities. Call 911 immediately if you, or someone you're with suddenly experiences one or more of the following symptoms:

- Loss of strength and/or sudden numbness in the face, arms or legs, even if temporary;

- Difficulty speaking or understanding and/or confusion, even if temporary;

- Loss of vision, even if temporary;

- Severe or unusual headache;

- Dizziness, especially when combined with any of the above signs.

Source: Heart and Stroke Foundation

Illustration:

- Photo: Leah Hannel, Calgary Herald / Dr. Tim Watson, a Calgary stroke neurologist, pauses for a photo before he and his wife, Doone Watson, rappelled off the Heart and Stroke Foundation building in Kensington.
- Photo: Heart and Stroke Foundation building in Kensington.

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