

Stuart, 54

Consultant, father & grandfather whose answer to one question saved his life: 'Public or private?', **SYDNEY**

Consultant, Stuart, 54, Sydney, was a self-described picture of health. Married with three children, and a grandfather-to- four, he was a non-smoker, and non-drinker who exercised several times a week. He was the last person anyone in his life would have expected to face a life-threatening cardiac emergency.

Without warning in 2022, Stuart experienced a rupture in his aorta – the body's main artery – resulting in a life-threatening silent aortic dissection.

With his only symptoms being dizziness and difficulty standing, Stuart was unaware that, due to the common asymptomatic nature of his cardiac problem, he arrived at the hospital Emergency Department (ED) in a critical condition, with just a 10-15 per cent chance of survival.



In what he would later come to recognise as a life-altering moment, Stuart was asked at the hospital reception desk, "Are you admitting yourself as a public or private patient?"

In the midst of his critical and rapidly deteriorating condition, Stuart sought the receptionist's advice, despite holding premium private health insurance at the time. Based on his symptoms, he was advised to be triaged as a public patient.

He would later learn his admission as a public patient would grant him access to life-saving medical technology, that he otherwise may not have received, highlighting the inequities in reimbursement for medical technologies within the Australian healthcare system.

This is Stuart's story.

"I've always been a really healthy and active person. I played rugby until my late forties, went to the gym four-to-five days a week, and ate well.

"I don't drink or smoke, and had no medical history of high blood pressure or heart issues. Some might have even described me as a picture of health!" said Stuart.

"People are always shocked when I tell them I've had open-heart surgery, and I understand why. I was the last person anyone would have expected to go through this."

Stuart recalls his whirlwind journey, from feeling dizzy at work, and struggling to stand, to receiving a life-saving medical device implanted in his heart.

"Without warning, I arrived at hospital with what they called a 'silent aortic dissection'. No pain, no sore arm, no pins and needles – just dizziness and the inability to stand up properly. That's all," Stuart said.

Stuart's aorta had ruptured. He would later learn he'd had only had a 10-15 per cent chance of survival.

"A woman on emergency department reception advised me to be admitted as a public patient because of my symptoms, and that moment probably saved my life."

"I later learned that, as a private patient, access to certain medical technologies can be limited because private health insurance doesn't always cover the full cost," said Stuart.

"By being admitted as a public patient, I was able to receive access to life-saving medical technology that made my surgery easier, faster, and ultimately saved my life.

"If I'd said the simple word 'private' that day – even though I had private health insurance – I might not be here now. It's incredible to think my survival came down to how I was admitted," Stuart said.

Stuart describes that day as "**the greatest day of the rest of my life.**" Today, he is back to living healthy, active life.

"I swim 40 laps, four-days-a-week, and I'm feeling great. I'm super healthy again – just living with a heart valve and some medical technology that keeps it ticking.

"Since his experience, Stuart now advocates for improved patient access to innovative medical technologies, no matter which system people find themselves in," said Stuart.

"I always assumed private health cover meant access to the very latest, and most advanced treatments. But I've learned that's not always the case. It's not fair, and it's not right.

"Your life shouldn't be valued differently just because of the system you're in – public or private," Stuart said.

"When it comes to accessing emergency medical technology, Australia needs urgent reform.

"Technology is evolving rapidly. It's incredible, and it can save more lives if we focus on what truly matters: the patient and their needs," said Stuart.

"We need to humanise the system and make it count in someone's hour of need."

Stuart is passionate about the value that medical technology provides to patients.

"Medical technology doesn't just add years to life – it adds life to those years.

"You don't care until you have to," Stuart said.

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