

Jillian, 63

Small business owner, support worker, mother & grandmother saved by access to innovative heart surgery, **BRISBANE**

Small business owner, support worker, mother, and grandmother, Jillian, 63, Brisbane, has lived much of her life with an autoimmune disease and a congenital heart defect.

About 40 years ago, Jillian was diagnosed with a heart murmur, which turned out to be a leak in her aortic valve. Despite being reassured it wouldn't get worse, she remained vigilant, attending regular check-ups for years. After a long period without complications, she eventually stopped monitoring her heart.

In 2022, amid the sale of her small business, Jillian began to feel consistently breathless. Assuming it was stress, she persevered through these symptoms for several weeks before presenting to hospital Emergency. There, she was referred to a cardiologist, who initially dismissed her concerns before later ordering a 24-hour Holter Monitor to track her heart activity.



A subsequent transesophageal echocardiogram revealed the severity of her condition, resulting in urgent surgery just two days later. During the operation, a heart-lung machine supported her for five hours, allowing surgeons to operate while her heart was stopped.

Jillian's surgeon used a newer, less commonly adopted device called an aortic valved conduit. This integrated apparatus allowed them to replace her aortic valve, aortic root, and part of her aortic arch in a single procedure, making a complex reconstruction safer and more efficient.

Despite experiencing post-operative complications, Jillian emphasises that the advanced device used in her procedure is a groundbreaking advancement for people with congenital heart defects. Now, Jillian advocates for all patients – public and private – to have timely access to the medical technologies that saved her life.

This is Jillian's story.

Jillian was born with a congenital heart defect and an underactive thyroid.

"I live with an underactive thyroid, often caused by an autoimmune condition, and a congenital heart defect.

"Around 40 years ago, I was diagnosed with a heart murmur and a slight leak in my aortic valve," said Jillian.

"Doctors assured me it wouldn't get any worse, so after years of diligently checking on it, I eventually stopped monitoring it."

Jillian recalls her journey from struggling with breathlessness, to receiving a life-saving heart device.

"Everything was fine until 2022, during the sale of my small business, when I started experiencing persistent breathlessness and trouble breathing while lying down.

"For weeks, I dismissed my symptoms as stress, until it became unbearable," Jillian said.

"I went to the hospital emergency department and was referred to a cardiologist, only to be told I was imagining things."

Jillian's awareness of her family history, combined with her determination, played a key role in her path to diagnosis.

"My grandfather died suddenly from a cardiac event, so I acted quickly to avoid the same fate.

"Once the cardiologist realised something was wrong, I had a CT scan and was referred to a surgeon within three weeks," said Jillian.

"When I finally saw the surgeon, I underwent a transesophageal echocardiogram (TOE), where an ultrasound probe is passed down the throat under light sedation. It revealed additional issues that needed immediate attention."

Just two days later, Jillian was admitted for life-saving surgery.

"During the operation I was supported by a heart-lung machine for five hours, and multiple central lines were inserted through my neck so the surgeons could monitor and medicate me while implanting the device that ultimately saved my life.

"I was fortunate to have a surgeon experienced with the latest medical technologies. Using an advanced device not yet widely used in Australia, they were able to replace my aortic valve, root, and arch in a single, life-saving procedure," Jillian said.

Jillian emphasises that, despite facing complications, her surgeon's confidence with cutting-edge medical technology was instrumental in preserving her quality of life.

"Not every surgeon looks beyond traditional methods, but my surgeon was open to new approaches and explained the different valve options.

"My recovery hasn't been easy, and I couldn't have done it without my family. But I wouldn't be here today without this surgery," said Jillian.

Jillian believes all patients should have timely access to innovative medical technology, just as she did.

"Heart disease and heart dysfunction are on the rise, and many people don't receive treatment in time. In my experience, innovation and advanced technology help ensure patients get the right care as quickly as possible," Jillian said.

"If these tools were accessible to all – not just those with private health cover or urgent cases – they could reduce hospital readmissions, improve long-term outcomes, and lower overall costs," said Jillian.

"While implementing new technology can be expensive, the long-term benefits for both patients and the healthcare system make it well worth it."

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MEDIA CONTACTS

Kirsten Bruce and Sophia Heather, VIVA! Communications

M 0401 717 566 | 0411 924 112

T 02 9968 3741 | 02 9968 3741

E kirstenbruce@vivacommunications.com.au / sophia@vivacommunications.com.au