



D.C. judge promotes stroke awareness through personal experience

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By Paula Wolfson

WASHINGTON - A local judge is speaking out about the day his staff defied his orders -- and saved his brain.

Lee Satterfield, the chief judge at D.C. Superior Court, suffered a stroke on Nov. 28, 2011, just two weeks before his 53rd birthday.

At first, he thought he was experiencing a bad headache. But when his staff noticed slurred speech, a colleague called 911.



Lee Satterfield, the chief judge at D.C. Superior Court, suffered a stroke two years ago. Now he is promoting stroke awareness. (Courtesy Lee Satterfield)

"I did not think I was having a stroke, it was the furthest thing from my mind," Satterfield says. "I was telling my staff, 'Don't call 911. I'm fine.' But they ignored me."

Satterfield was rushed to George Washington University Hospital. By the time he got there, his symptoms were getting worse. He couldn't move one arm and his vision was compromised.

However, the window for medical intervention to reverse the most debilitating effects of the stroke was still open, and the medical team acted fast.

"He arrived within a perfect time window where he was a candidate for acute therapy," says Dr. Kathleen Burger, head of the stroke program at the hospital.

Doctors first administered a clot-busting drug. Then, they decided on surgery to extract the clot from his brain.

"Once they did it, there was immediate improvement, and I could lift my left arm," Satterfield says.

His progress was so rapid that physical therapy was not needed, and he was able to return to work two weeks later.

Satterfield says he owes his survival and quick recovery to superb medical care and quick-thinking colleagues who knew the signs of stroke and the importance of acting fast.

And that is why he is telling his story now, during National Stroke Awareness Month.

Satterfield says he understands from personal experience how important it is to know the warning signs of a stroke -- not just for oneself, but to help others.

"I want folks to know what the symptoms are so they can recognize and err on the side of being overly cautious," he says.

Those warning signs include difficulty moving an arm or leg, a face that is drooping on one side, slurred or strange speech and a sudden loss of vision in one or both eyes.

Burger says not to question whether these symptoms warrant emergency action -- just call 911.

"Don't worry about a false alarm," she says. "We would prefer to have patients come and have nothing wrong with them than miss an opportunity to treat someone who has something devastating."

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