



The Heart of the Matter

By Trish Power

Marilyn Cook isn't the type of woman to take bad news lying down. When her doctor in Fairbanks, Alaska, told her a few months ago she needed a new heart valve – and it would require an incision running the length of her torso – she already knew there was a better way.

Back in 2005, Cook was diagnosed with a slight heart murmur. Initially, there were no symptoms. Nothing slowed her down. She was, after all, a woman of the frontier and a former Alaska

State Trooper. Over time, the condition worsened. By this year, it was clear she'd need surgery. Her doctor began making plans for her to go to Anchorage for a traditional valve replacement. Cook was determined to avoid the "zipper," and through online research knew a minimally invasive approach existed.

She researched dozens of hospitals and narrowed her choices to two – one in Southern California, one in South Florida. Both were top rated hospitals. Both had highly accomplished physicians



performing minimally invasive aortic valve replacement surgery. By air, Long Beach was a few hours from her home. Fort Lauderdale was as far as you could go and still be in the United States. But Broward Health Medical Center had a video on its website of the surgeon performing the very procedure she needed.

Still, California was much closer and the airfare more reasonable. She called both surgeons' offices. At one, she got a cool reception. At the other, the people she spoke to offered warmth and compassion.

The friendly voices belonged to Julie Delongy and Nichole Cusack in the Broward Health Heart Valve Center.

"You could tell they really care. They really are concerned," Cook said. "I felt pulled to come here."

Three flights and 19 hours later she was in Fort Lauderdale.

It was a good call. In April, Broward Health opened a new state-of-the-art Heart Valve Center. The facility provides a one-stop-shop for patients with complex diseases of heart valves that underlie and compound many cardiovascular conditions. The center streamlines the diagnostic and treatment process for patients and referring physicians.

"We've put together a multi-disciplinary approach to heart valve disease," said Dr. Kenneth Herskowitz, medical director of cardiovascular surgery at Broward Health and the surgeon who installed Cook's new valve. "The center allows us to simplify the approach to address the needs of patients with advanced valvular heart disease, including those who may not

be candidates for traditional surgery."

The Heart Valve Center is part of Broward Health's Heart Center of Excellence, which treats hundreds of patients a year, and Herskowitz expects those numbers to increase with the new center.

He's in a good position to make such predictions. As a physician in practice for 20 years, he has performed more than 6,000 cardiovascular surgical procedures and is an expert in the field of minimally invasive aortic and mitral valve surgery, as well as beating heart surgery. He's the principal investigator on numerous research projects at Broward Health.

It was Herskowitz that Cook saw performing the valve replacement surgery in the ORLive video. ORLive, a surgical broadcasting company, works with hospitals and device manufacturers to produce custom, interactive video programs that demonstrate the latest surgical techniques.

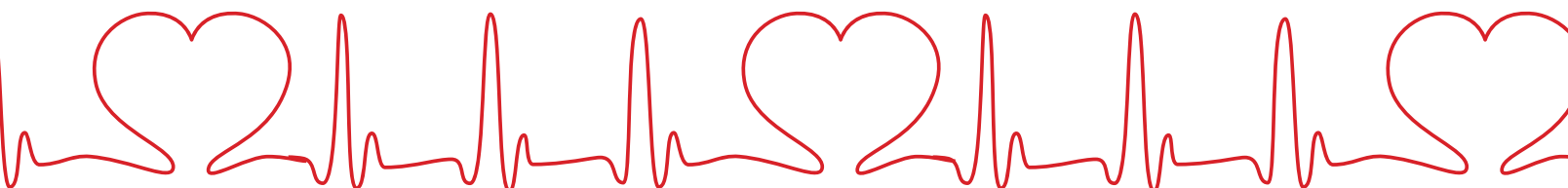
Unlike traditional open-heart surgery, which requires a 10- to 12-inch incision in the chest, minimally invasive surgery involves a small, two-inch slit between the ribs that provides access to the

heart valve. Through this approach, the valve can be repaired or replaced. As a result, the surgery is less traumatic for the patient and can offer more benefits than traditional cardiac surgery, such as quicker recovery time and shorter hospital stays. For patients, it typically means less pain, less blood loss and a lower risk of infection.

One day after surgery, it meant a very happy 65th birthday for Cook.



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"One of my favorite pictures is the one with the pound cake and Happy Birthday written on the food order from my nurse Shannon," she said. "They sang happy birthday! How cool is that? What a difference a day makes."

That was just one of many details that affirmed her choice to fly more than 5,000 miles for the surgery. From the moment she walked in the front door at Broward Health Medical Center until she was cleared to fly back to Alaska, Cook said she found exceptional care. A testament to her skills as a trooper for more than 17 years, she easily recalls the names of everyone who was part of that experience.

"I appreciate the courteous staff from every department that touched my life," she said.

At the Broward Health Heart Valve Center, patients have access to a full spectrum of cardiology procedures and other services for cardiovascular issues.

The minimal incision approach can be applied to most cardiac surgical procedures, including aortic valve repair or replacement, mitral valve repair or replacement, tricuspid valve repair or replacement, double-valve procedures, congenital heart defects and multi-vessel coronary bypass grafting.

Dr. Ashok K. Sharma, director of non-invasive cardiology for Broward Health, said the facility is especially tailored to meet the needs of South Florida patients, noting ethnic groups face an increased risk of heart valve disease.

"Rheumatic heart disease is a precursor to heart valve disease, and it is more prevalent in Asian, Caribbean and South American people," Sharma said.

About five million Americans have heart valve diseases and many do not have symptoms. Those conditions can cause heart damage and lead to heart failure and even death, if left untreated. As boomers age, the number of people with heart valve diseases is sure to grow.

"There is a need as the population of aging baby boomers is growing. This center will make it very easy for physicians to work with us to help their patients with valvular heart disease," Sharma said. "There has been a population of patients out there who would benefit from non-surgical non-invasive techniques, and this center will increase the opportunities for them."

Whether from across the country or Broward Health's own backyard, the Heart Valve Center's main goal is to provide a level of care that has patients returning to their normal lives as quickly and successfully as possible. During her post discharge appointment with Herskowitz, prior to heading back to Alaska,

Cook had important questions about her second lease on life ready for asking.



Cook: "When can I sleep on my side?"
Herskowitz: "Now!"



Cook: "Was I a good patient?"
Herskowitz: "I wish all my patients were like you."



Cook: "When can I ride my motorcycle?"
Herskowitz: "You drive a motorcycle?" (pause) "Three to four weeks." 🌟