

Year after heart surgery in ICU, 92-yr-old on feet

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MUMBAI: A 92-year-old woman from Chembur has recovered completely from a life-saving heart surgery that was carried out in an ICU, instead of the operation theatre. A year on, the nonagenarian is leading a perfectly normal life without suffering from any infection or complication.

Doctors at Lilavati Hospital in Bandra claimed that the unusual approach was adopted to save Gauri Shah's life, as there was no time to transport her to the OT, even though it was on the same floor, a few minutes away. After following up with the patient for a year, the hospital wants to document the case to underscore that out-of-box practices can be adopted in hospitals with success, to save lives.

Cardiac surgeon Dr Omi Jaiswal, who led the team that carried out the procedure, claimed it was the first time a complete sternotomy was performed in an ICU. He said the patient's heart had started to bleed after a temporary pacing wire that regularises irregular heart rhythms perforated the heart while it was being pulled out of the body. While this complication is seen in 3-7% patients, most do not continue to bleed like Shah. The bleeding had led to a life-threatening condition cardiac tamponade where the heart is suppressed and struggling to beat, as the sac surrounding it is filled with blood.

"In a matter of seconds, her blood pressure dropped to 40/20 as her heart was continuously bleeding. The only solution was to plug the hole in her heart, but there was no time to shift her to an OT," he said. Nurses in the ICU had activated 'code blue' and the emergency team was on its way. The patient was intubated and anaesthetized, before the cardiac tray from the OT had arrived with an electrical saw. Her chest wall was cut open in a procedure called sternotomy and the leak was plugged.

Jaiswal said they had to opt for the open chest approach after attempts to use a needle and clear blood clots near the heart failed. "Some of us were in formal clothes as we were on our daily rounds. We had enough time to put on a gown and gloves," he said. The doctors sutured the hole and restored the heart's functioning within 20 minutes. "Often, we need to look beyond protocol as such steps could eliminate the risks of transporting critically ill patients. It shows the benefits of having standard infection control practices given that some of the most dreaded hospital-acquired infections lurk in ICUs," Jaiswal said.

Studies from the west suggest many procedures have moved out of operating rooms. The ICU is increasingly being used for minor bedside procedures for reasons ranging from cost and saving critical patients to availability of OTs.

Dr Prafulla Kerkar, head of cardiology at Parel's KEM Hospital, called it an "extremely rare approach" but a valid one under the given circumstances. "In the good old days, many procedures were carried out at bedsides. Even in neonates, it is done, but it is not common and depends on the urgency of the situation," he said.