

HEALTH & WELL-BEING

RON SCHLOERB/CAPE
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Dr. Tom Sbarra spent a career treating cardiovascular disease. Now through the Cardiovascular Wellness Program at Falmouth Hospital he and a team of specialists teach people how to prevent heart disease.



TOM SBARRA, MD

In the heart of his community

BY BARBARA RAVAGE

Tom Sbarra intended to retire after practicing cardiology for 25 years. The plan was for him and his wife, Judy, to spend a year in New Zealand, then come home to Falmouth for a life of active leisure.

They did the New Zealand part, living in Wellington while Tom worked in a teaching hospital. "I'd always wanted to go there," he says. "It was a fabulous experience." But when they returned to the Cape last year, Tom was offered the opportunity to develop a program aimed at preventing heart attacks rather than treating them after they occur. Having spent his career battling cardiovascular disease, Tom jumped at the chance.

Cardiovascular disease refers to a constellation of disorders of the heart and circulatory system, most of which have a cause-and-effect relationship. High blood

About the author

Barbara Ravage moved to Cape Cod from her native New York City in 2000, after the youngest of her children went off to college. She considers heavy doses of ocean air and Cape light the best cure for empty nest syndrome. A graduate of Barnard College, she is the author of nine books, including a biography of Rachel Carson for middle-school students and "Burn Unit: Saving Lives After the Flames," which explores the history and science of burn treatment. She balances her writing life with yoga, karate, and pottery. After years of making do with two summer weeks on the Cape, her favorite part about living here is that she's already home.



Dr. Thomas Sbarra posed for the 2006 Men of Falmouth calendar to raise funds for Wings for Falmouth Families, P.O. Box 843, Falmouth, MA 02541; 508-457-7934; www.wingsforfalmouth.comcharity.

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Sbarra

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pressure, high cholesterol, and atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) increase the risk of heart attack and stroke. Chest pain (angina) results when atherosclerosis starves the coronary arteries of oxygen-rich blood, which leads to coronary heart disease, which in turn leads to heart failure and heart attack. Heart fluttering, palpitations, and other irregular heartbeats (arrhythmia, fibrillation) may result from coronary heart disease and play a part in heart attacks, heart failure, and stroke. Atherosclerosis also causes peripheral artery disease, which may lead to loss of a limb and be a factor in heart attack and stroke.

Type 2 diabetes, a metabolic disorder linked to obesity and a sedentary lifestyle, contributes to all of the above.

These conditions are disabling at best; at worst, they are fatal. The American Heart Association estimates that nearly 80 million Americans have one or more forms of cardiovascular disease. It is the cause of more than 800,000 deaths in the US each year. Depending on the condition, treatment could be with drugs, surgery, implanted devices, or a combination. All treatment options carry risks without promising a cure, and they are all expensive.

In Tom's view, it would be far better to prevent cardiovascular disease, and to do it with lifestyle changes – eating better and exercising more. That's where the Cardiovascular Wellness Program comes in.

"Lifestyle changes are extremely important," Tom insists. The good news is that the more out of shape a person is, the less it takes to reduce the risk of developing cardiovascular disease. A completely sedentary person is at high risk, he explains, but with even a modest increase in activity, "the risk falls tremendously."

He points to studies showing that "just exercising and eating better food can reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease by 30 to 35 percent, which is about the same risk reduction we're getting from statin drugs," the cholesterol-lowering pills prescribed by the millions.

Under the auspices of the Cardiovascular Specialists, a group practice associated with Falmouth and Cape Cod hospitals, Tom leads a multidisciplinary team that includes a nurse practitioner, nutritionist, and behavioral psychologist. Other team members help smokers quit and offer healthy eating and cooking classes. A room is set aside for patient education, with fact sheets, brochures, books, audiovisual material, and computers with Internet access. Through alliances with several gyms in the Falmouth area, program participants get reduced membership fees and blood pressure monitoring to help them increase their physical activity safely.

The program grew out of a partnership between the Cardiovascular Specialists and Falmouth Hospital that has held vascular screenings for the community several times a year.

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The Cardiovascular Wellness Program takes it to the next level. Actually, there are five levels, referred to as "tiers." The first tier is a vascular ultrasound

screening, which shows the condition of the circulatory system, including narrowed arteries and possible blockages. In consultation with Tom, clients may opt for a more thorough evaluation of their blood vessels, testing for high cholesterol and the risk of diabetes, exercise stress testing, individualized nutritional counseling, a personal exercise plan, all the way up to the fifth tier, a comprehensive cardiovascular risk assessment and lifestyle improvement program, which includes 18 months of follow-up.

Except for some blood tests, the program is self-pay. As Tom explains, most health care plans cover treatment, not prevention. Until and unless that changes, the fee – ranging from \$125 to \$1600 – should be considered a personal investment in a longer, healthier life.

The program combines high-tech devices with a common-sense approach to making lifestyle changes tailored to the individual. The key ingredient is motivation.

"We have to come up with creative ways of getting people to exercise," Tom says, but it's important to make

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it something that fits into their lives so they will stick with it over the long haul. For some people that means taking classes at a gym. Others might need a personal trainer. Some are so out of condition that they should begin with a daily walk and work up from there.

Tom favors a combination of activities, outdoors when weather permits, indoors on other days. "You don't have to be on a treadmill an hour a day," something he personally finds "incredibly boring." Instead, he suggests, go for variety: bike, tennis, swimming, whatever you can and like to do.

He advises people who say they can't find the time for exercise to break it up into smaller pieces. If that doesn't work, "Instead of just bailing on the whole thing, spend ten minutes exercising. You'll feel better and it will maintain your fitness until you can go back to a more extensive program." Ten minutes of vigorous exercise, he says, is more effective than 40 minutes of low-intensity activity.

Still, he warns, people who are extremely out of shape should start slowly and gradually increase exercise intensity – and they should do it with medical guidance. "It's very common for people's blood pressure to go crazy during exercise if they're not used to it," he explains. That's what's behind the classic heart attack while shoveling snow.

Trim and fit at 61, Tom practices what he preaches. The former marathoner ran the Falmouth Road Race 20 years in a row. Then his knees told him it was time to stop. He still plays tennis and golf, skis, bikes, and windsurfs.

The Sbarra came to the Cape in 1980. After getting his MD from Michigan State, Tom had just finished his postgraduate medical training at Deaconess and Brigham and Women's hospitals and the West Roxbury VA. Tom and Judy met at Deaconess, where she worked as a medical technician. They chose the Cape because she is from Maine and he is from Long Island, and "the Cape is sort of halfway between. I wanted a place where I could sail. We both liked the idea of being in a small town. Falmouth seemed to fit the bill. And," he adds, "they didn't have a cardiologist at the time."

So Tom set up his cardiology practice, with Judy assisting, first as medical tech and later in a manage-

Quickhits

The path to heart happiness

The Cardiovascular Wellness Program
The Cardiovascular Specialists
90 Ter Heun Drive
Falmouth, MA 02540
508-495-7044

Cardiovascular risk factors you can't change ...

- Age over 65
- Male gender
- Heredity, including race and family history

... and those you can change

- Smoking
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Physical inactivity
- Overweight and obesity
- Diabetes

The American Heart Association Web site has a wealth of information about heart health and heart disease, including a tool to calculate your risk for a heart attack.

www.americanheart.org

rial role, until her retirement in 2005. Their two children, now 28 and 25, attended the Falmouth public schools and then went off to college, their daughter to Duke and their son to the University of Colorado.

It was Tom's commitment to his small town that inspired him to shed his clothes for the "Men of Falmouth" calendar, a 2006 fund-raiser for Wings for Falmouth Families (WFFF). He appears as Mr. February, because February is American Heart Month.

The mission of WFFF is to provide "local families with school-age children an immediate safety net of financial assistance during a time of medical crisis or tragic event."

Tom serves on the WFFF board. He was shocked to see how quickly serious illness can unravel a family, financially as well as emotionally. Wings provides short-term assistance – a few months rent or mortgage payments, gas money, food – to bridge the gap until appropriate social services can be lined up.

"It's been very gratifying," he says. "This is a pretty small town, so you feel like you're helping your neighbors."

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