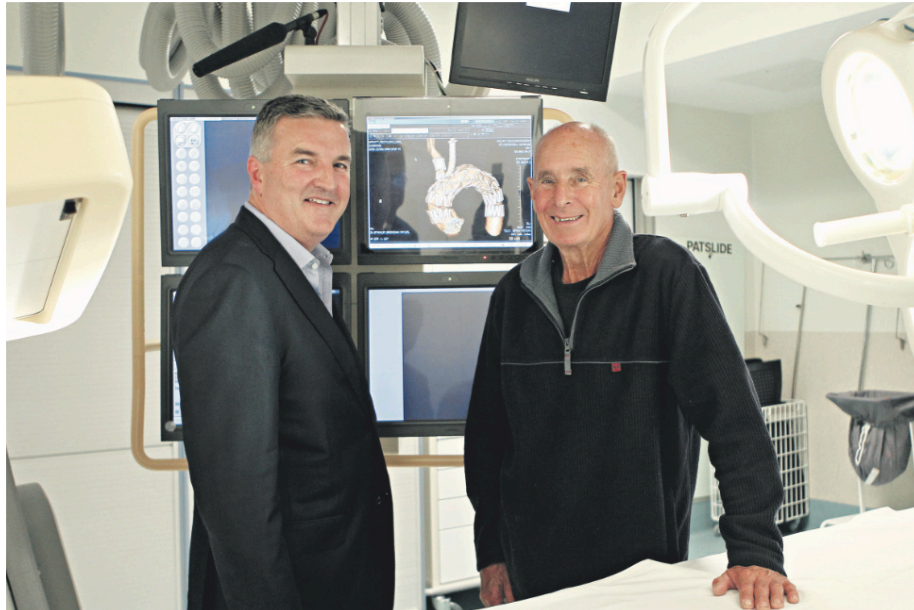


GROUND-BREAKING PROCEDURE



Grateful patient: Fremantle Hospital surgeon Brendan Stanley with Keith Spratt. Picture: Mogens Johansen

'Luckiest man' in world after op

■ Cathy O'Leary
Medical Editor

Keith Spratt has become the first Australian patient to have a rare type of surgery to stop his heart from "exploding".

The 70-year-old from Oakford admitted this week he considered himself "the luckiest man in the world" to have survived to celebrate his golden wedding anniversary.

Four months ago things looked grim, with Mr Spratt on death row after being rushed to Fremantle Hospital coughing up blood.

Doctors used a CT scan to diagnose a massive aneurysm, or ballooning, in the main artery that takes blood from the heart to the rest of the body.

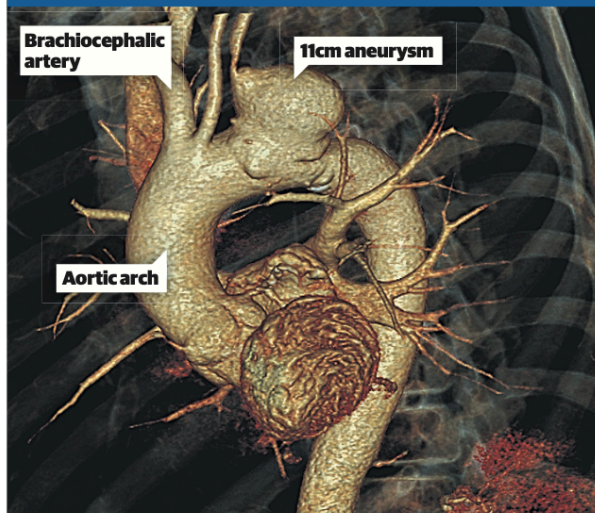
His family was told to prepare for the worst, after a cardiothoracic surgeon said Mr Spratt would never survive routine heart surgery. But in a stroke of luck, another doctor at the hospital, vascular surgeon Brendan Stanley, had a plan.

One of only a handful of surgeons world-wide with the expertise to carry out a new stent graft procedure, he helped tweak a metal and mesh device that could be implanted to cut off the aneurysm sack without rupturing it, while still supplying blood to the rest of the body.

But only a dozen cases had been attempted in the world, and some patients had died or suffered strokes in the risky surgery.

A nerve-racking four-week wait followed while the custom-made stent was built by health technicians, with special holes to allow for the curve of the aortic arch and the arteries branching out from it.

TICKING TIMEBOMB



Danger: A diagram of Mr Spratt's aorta aneurysm.

In the meantime, Mr Spratt got sicker, losing 20kg.

The aneurysm grew from nine to 11 centimetres in a fortnight, putting so much pressure on the nerves in his larynx that his voice became raspy.

In a five-hour operation known as arch aneurysm repair, the stent was finally inserted using a catheter through the groin and painstakingly positioned while doctors stopped his heart.

"It was tough and go all along and everyone was worried the aneurysm could rupture at any time," Dr Stanley said.

"It was the first time we had placed a covered stent in the aorta where the major arteries to the brain and arms are located.

"We had to exclude the aneurysm from the blood flow to prevent rupture."

Mr Spratt, a grandfather of six, said he knew he was alive today only because he was taken to Fremantle Hospital.

"The last thing I saw when I had the operation was the nurse in the theatre watching me and the thought went through my head whether that was the last thing I would ever see," he said.

The successful surgery meant that Mr Spratt was able to celebrate his recent 50th wedding anniversary, his wife Di's 70th birthday and his eldest granddaughter's 21st.

Mrs Spratt said everything had fallen into place as if it was meant to be.

"It was very scary but we were lucky to have been in Perth where people knew about this operation and were prepared to try," she said.