

INHERITED HEART DISEASE

Bad genes, bad habits deadly

Family history important in revealing health risks

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During heart health month, there is a lot talk about how to keep the ticker healthy and happy.

But what if a bad heart condition can't be prevented because it's inherited?

This February, the QEII's inherited heart disease clinic is warning people about a type of heart disease that, if not caught, can be fatal.

Dr. Martin Gardner, heart rhythm specialist and founder of the clinic, says inherited heart disease is a condition that stems from a gene abnormality that is passed from parents to children.

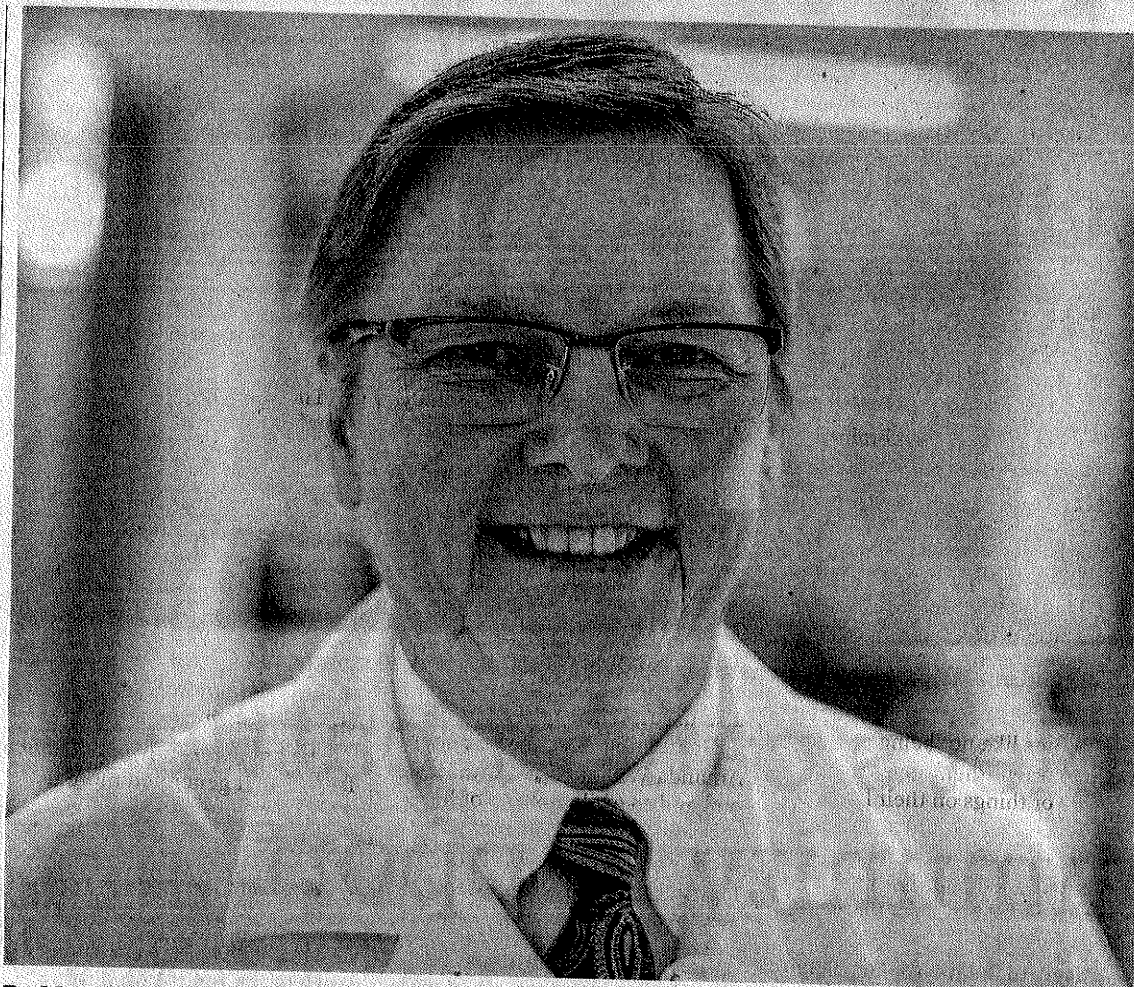
"People can feel completely well, never know they have a heart problem, and it can show up as a sudden death," Gardner said in a phone interview earlier this month.

This tragedy is often seen in young athletes, who continue to physically exert themselves during practices and games, completely unaware that they have a heart condition that requires them to take certain precautions.

His clinic tries to identify the problem before it has dire effects.

When Gardner founded the clinic in 2004, it was the first of its kind in the country. He works with a team of three cardiologists, a research nurse, two genetic counsellors, one geneticist and a data entry clerk.

Since opening, they have seen about 2,000 patients and identified 600 families with an inher-



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Now there are clinics like this across the country, and they all collaborate on research projects. The clinic's research efforts are supported by the Heart and Stroke Foundation and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

Once families are referred to the clinic, his team will conduct heart tests, like echocardiograms and stress monitoring, to see if they can identify an irregular pulse.

They also do genetic testing in conjunction with IWK Health Centre and use an MRI machine to see if they can find any abnormalities in the heart structure and

function.

But one problem with inherited heart disease is that it's hard to self diagnose.

Gardner says the only risk factor individuals could catch themselves would be if they noticed a string of sudden, unexplained deaths in their family history.

Many other symptoms, like blackout spells and heart palpitations, are fairly common and can be linked to other conditions.

So if a patient were to go to the emergency room for an irregular heartbeat, they wouldn't necessarily get referred to the clinic.

"But, if they combine those symptoms with abnormalities on

their tests or a family history of sudden death at a young age, those cases should . . . come to be in the inherited heart disease clinic."

Gardner says Canadians are increasingly recognizing that heart disease can be avoided by healthy living.

But inherited heart disease isn't as well known.

He says health care providers are learning that inherited heart disease exists, but he says more patients need to be informed.

"What people need to become aware of is that the reason for sudden death may be inherited, and thus, other family members might be affected," he said.