

'Good as new' a day after heart op

By [Martin Johnston](#)

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Greig Cuthers was walking and talking to his family within a day of being the first patient in the Asia-Pacific region to receive a revolutionary form of heart treatment.

"I feel as good as new," Mr Cuthers declared, standing next to his bed at Mercy Hospital in Auckland.

The One Tree Hill 70-year-old is looking forward to heading home, possibly today, and going out for a walk.

"Before I went in for the treatment my hands were cold and I got short of breath and tingling in my legs."

On Monday, he had a new aortic valve implanted in his heart, between the main pumping chamber and the aorta, the body's main artery.

But as he was unsuitable for the traditional open-heart surgery to replace the valve – because of a weak heart and previous heart surgery – he had the new procedure, which, like angioplasty, is done by remote-control through a tube inserted at the groin.

Mr Cuthers was one of four patients treated using the new technique at Mercy by a team led by cardiologist John Ormiston.

Dr Ormiston said that with surgery, patients were in hospital for weeks and took at least six weeks before they could resume normal activities, but with the new procedure, they were typically in hospital for three to six days and back to normal life within a week or two.

"They are so much better. Even one day after the procedure all our patients have been talking and making jokes."

The procedure was developed in the United States and Europe around 2004–05 and has been performed in 1500 patients.

"This is one of the biggest advances in cardiology in the last 10 to 15 years," said Dr Malcolm Legget, one of the Mercy cardiologists involved.

The treatment has been pioneered among patients who are not suitable for surgery or are considered high risk. For them, the only treatment has been inflation of a balloon in the diseased valve to improve blood flow, or medicines of limited effectiveness.

It is estimated 4 per cent of people over 65 have a diseased aortic valve. This creates problems such as breathlessness, angina pain, fainting and heart attack. Fifty to 80 per cent of those with this condition who do not get a replacement will die within two years of developing symptoms.

The new procedure costs \$50,000 to \$60,000 – half of it for the valve, made of metal and the tissue that surrounds pigs' hearts. Open-heart surgery costs on average \$32,000, or \$42,000 if there are complications.

Dr Ormiston said the initial aim was to establish the new procedure only for those who could not have surgery, because the surgery was very successful for patients who could have it, although he expected it would ultimately replace the surgical option.

"We have to prove this is better than surgery before patients who ordinarily would have surgery have this."



Greig Cuthers (front) is keen to go walking following his treatment by a team led by Dr John Ormiston. Photo / Richard Robinson

But the new procedure was more effective than the balloon therapy – which provided only temporary relief and was linked with repeated hospital admissions. The valve-replacement patients lived longer and felt better.

The procedure is not yet funded by insurers or performed by public hospitals. The four Mercy cases were funded partly by a charitable trust, and some contributed themselves.

The director of coronary care at Auckland City Hospital, Professor Harvey White, said last night there were plans to introduce the same kind of procedure – which he expected would complement but not replace surgery – at Waikato Hospital.

The hospital would treat three patients in the next few weeks.

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