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The Expert Is In: Electrophysiology Program Director Felix Yang, MD



Since the FDA approved the process of pulsed field ablation (PFA) in late 2023, "more patients opt right away for an ablative procedure, rather than trying medications that may not work or have side effects," says Dr. Felix Yang, a cardiac electrophysiologist who joined NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn in November. "It is a huge step forward."

Dr. Felix Yang, a cardiac electrophysiologist who focuses on the heart's electrical activities, discusses the program he's building at NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn to treat patients with irregular heartbeats.

You joined NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn in November 2024 to establish a clinical program around atrial fibrillation procedures. How will these surgeries help patients with irregular heartbeats?

I work with patients whose heart rhythms are too fast, too slow, or irregular, and I specialize in a minimally invasive procedure called atrial fibrillation ablation. Atrial fibrillation is a type of irregular heart rhythm, also known as an arrhythmia, that occurs when the upper chambers of the heart beat irregularly and rapidly. The lifetime risk of having atrial fibrillation is around 20 to 25 percent—it's a sizeable population. Symptoms can include palpitations, shortness of breath, and dizziness. Atrial fibrillation can increase your risk of blood clots and strokes, so timely diagnosis and management is very important.

There have been major advances in the field of atrial fibrillation ablation in the last year, with the introduction of pulsed field ablation (PFA). Why is that so significant?

Traditionally, during an atrial fibrillation ablation procedure, we used catheters to burn or freeze parts of the heart to make them electrically inactive, which helps prevent arrhythmias. But there were always risks: potential damage to the esophagus, blood vessels, and nerves, and the chance of stroke and bleeding, although significant complications are generally rare. Then in late 2023, the FDA approved a catheter that utilizes a different type of energy to treat atrial fibrillation. Pulsed field ablation (PFA) has dramatically changed the electrophysiology landscape. PFA uses pulses of electricity to create lesions on heart tissue, without the thermal risks of traditional radiofrequency ablation (burning) and cryoablation (freezing). Most electrophysiologists have switched over to PFA because of how effective and safe it is, with the risk of esophageal injury and phrenic nerve injury basically down to zero. It's become the new gold standard. With PFA, more patients opt right away for an ablative procedure, rather than trying medications that may not work or have side effects. It is a huge step forward.

Devices like Watchman implants have also helped advance treatment for those with atrial fibrillation. How do these help patients?

The Watchman device is an implant that closes off the heart's left atrial appendage, preventing blood clots from forming in that section of the heart and traveling to the brain, where they could cause strokes. Since the approval of the Watchman implant in 2015, more than 300,000 patients have received this device. This implant allows patients to discontinue blood thinners such as Eliquis and Xarelto, reducing their risk of bleeding while still being protected from strokes and embolisms.

Smart watches, such as the Apple Watch series, which feature electrocardiogram (ECG) apps, have also become helpful in the last few years in diagnosing arrhythmias. How do they work?

A lot of patients now own smart watches that capture ECGs. The watches take readings of a patient's heart rhythm, and patients can send the results directly to their physicians. Frequently I'll have patients either email me or send me a MyChart message with data from their watch. Technology has done a lot of good in empowering patients to take control of their health.

Why was this the right time to introduce the procedures at NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn?

With the advent of truly comprehensive cardiac care at NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn, including cardiac surgery, this was the perfect time to start and build a program offering atrial fibrillation and other advanced heart procedures. Since November, we have completed more than 50 atrial fibrillation procedures. That's 50 patients who were able to get advanced, world-class heart care here in Brooklyn as opposed to having to go to Manhattan. This has been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

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