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Doctors perform Rowan's first emergency angioplasty

Early last Tuesday morning, a 66-year-old Salisbury man was preparing to visit his uncle, when suddenly he felt a sharp pain in his chest.

"It was like someone had taken a sledgehammer and pounded me right in the middle of my chest and I couldn't get my breath," James "Pop" Rabon said. "I called my uncle, and he asked how I was doing, and I said 'I think I'm having a heart attack.'"

Rabon's wife, Sarah, convinced him to call 911, and the emergency medical paramedics whisked him away to Rowan Regional Medical Center's Emergency Department. Dr. Barry Kramer, Rowan Regional's new interventional cardiologist at the Smith Heart & Vascular Center, was in the Emergency Department when Pop Rabon arrived.

"Dr. Kramer told me I could go down to Charlotte and have the emergency (angioplasty) performed there, or he could do it right there. I chose to do it here. I hate helicopters and flying anyway. He got me at the right time and the right place, and saved my life," Rabon said.

Pop Rabon was the first area resident to have an emergency angioplasty at the new Smith Heart & Vascular Center.

Doctors discharged Rabon from Rowan three days later, on Aug. 10, and he's back home now in East Rowan. He said he's grateful he had the procedure available to him where he could be close to friends and family.

"The Smith Heart & Vascular Center is the greatest thing to have happened to this community—it's a life saver," Rabon said. "There's no doubt about that. I know. They saved my life."

With two interventional cardiologists now in Rowan as part of the partnership between the Sanger Clinic and Rowan Regional, officials at the hospital say heart attack victims in Rowan County can rest a little easier knowing treatment is nearby.

Angioplasty with stent placement is widely considered the best treatment for a person who experiences a heart attack caused by a blockage in an artery that feeds blood to the heart muscle. Time is critical in such cases because the longer the heart muscle is deprived of blood, the more likely the patient will die or face debilitating illness.

Clots are often the cause of heart attacks, and anyone with symptoms should call 911 immediately, officials at Rowan Regional advise. Common symptoms include a severe pain in the center of the chest or left arm, jaw or back, feeling faint and short of breath or having a sensation that the heart is pounding.

During the procedure, a cardiologist re-opens the clogged artery with a balloon and places a stent in the artery to keep open.

Doctors describe angioplasty/stenting as "a minimally invasive procedure" that typically requires a fairly short recovery period. Stents are placed in about 70 to 90 percent of all angioplasties, according to the American Heart Association.