Implantation of a Left Ventricular Assist Device (LVAD) from the Recipient’s Perspective: Then It Becomes Real

Background:
The implantation of an LVAD occurs during the advanced-stage of heart failure and is a life-changing event for recipients. In most cases, recipients must choose between accepting the implanted LVAD or preparing for the imminent end of their lives. Despite the gravity of this situation, few studies explore the lived experiences among LVAD recipients or the process of decision-making to obtain an LVAD from the perspective of the recipient, and little is known about the recipient’s expectation of what life would be like after implantation.

Purpose: To examine the experience of LVAD recipients about life with an implanted device from their perspective, including the decision to obtain the LVAD and their expectations about living with the device after implantation.

Methods
A qualitative content analysis was completed using open-ended questions asked directly to LVAD recipients in a dedicated online support group. Ninety recipients discussed their experiences about LVAD implantation, including the decision to obtain the LVAD, pre-surgical education, post-implantation communication with the health-care team, and the positive and negative aspects of living with an implanted LVAD.

Results
From the perspective of the recipient, the LVAD extends life but requires significant sacrifices. This study uncovered a theme that LVAD recipients may not view the life-and-death decision to obtain an LVAD as a choice. In addition, the expectations of LVAD recipients may not fully account for the difficulties of life with the device following implantation.

Conclusion
The decision to obtain an implanted LVAD is often made with limited time to consider options. Recipients may feel informed before implantation, but “then it becomes real” only after implantation occurs. Effective communication between the recipient and LVAD health care team is essential before and after device implantation. Understanding the perspective of the recipient at time of decision-making and recognizing the importance of discussing the positive and negative aspects of life with an LVAD before and after implantation is essential to help the recipient adjust to life with the device.