

# Against All Odds

*Ilene Springer*

## Dr. William Castelli: A Pioneer Speaks Out!



*William P. Castelli, MD*

**W**illiam P. Castelli, MD, is a pioneer in his own family. Not because he is the outspoken director of the Framingham Heart Study—the longest-running heart study in the world. It's because he is the first man among his kin to turn 50 without a heart attack.

How did Castelli, now 60, do it? The way he wants everyone to do it—by facing the facts of heart disease:

- high total cholesterol and low HDL (good cholesterol) are among the strongest predictors of heart disease;
- high blood pressure increases the risk of heart attack and stroke by up to five times;
- smokers have a 70% chance of dying of a heart attack.

"I'm living proof that you can beat the odds of heart disease—even if it runs in your family," he says.

### **Framingham Study**

Castelli, who launched his career as a rheumatologist, joined the Framingham Heart Study in 1965 as director of laboratories, and then in 1979, he became its director. The study itself began in 1948 under the jurisdiction of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

Since then, every two years more than 5,000 residents of this Massachusetts town have volunteered themselves for medical scrutiny: Pulses are taken, diets are monitored, habits are revealed. The Framingham study has identified about 200 risk factors associated with heart disease. The big three: elevated cholesterol, hypertension and smoking.

The nucleus of this study is housed in an old convent behind a Catholic high school in Framingham. Castelli himself enjoys modest—if not chaotic—trappings. His office is a vigorous three flights up, with a cardboard placard on the door. Dr. "C," as his receptionist refers to him, waves you in.

**"Framingham identified the big three: cholesterol, blood pressure and smoking."**

“Somebody messed up my office,” he chuckles. Indeed, his surroundings could rival any teenager’s bedroom. Stacks of papers and large manila envelopes smother desk, floor and tables.

But while Castelli could have trouble finding yesterday’s memo, he has complete command of all the statistics he’s been pushing in his battle against the nation’s #1 killer. “Four out of five people on this earth can’t get their cholesterol over 150; they don’t get heart attacks. One out of five people can’t get their cholesterol down to 150. They do get heart attacks. And almost all of them live in affluent countries.”

He balances a cup of tea on a chair. “Do you know that in the 40 years of Framingham we have never had a heart attack in anyone with a total cholesterol under 150?”

### Naysayers

Castelli, his hair striking white, sports a shirt, vest and red tie. He is a heart-health politician. And like all politicians, he has his opponents. “We have these people out there who say, ‘Stop the cholesterol campaign.’”

They argue that the risks of high cholesterol have been exaggerated. Probably the most notable is journalist Thomas Moore, whose arguments three years ago in the *Atlantic Monthly* made headlines. “There is no evidence that lowering high cholesterol will increase life expectancy,” he claimed.

“But that’s not the point,” retorts Castelli. “Look, we’re not offering miracles. We’re talking about the quality of life, not just longevity.”

### Adventists

As evidence, Castelli offers the Seventh-day Adventists, whose religious philosophy recommends a vegetarian (and therefore low-cholesterol) diet, regular exercise and abstention from alcohol, caffeine and tobacco products.

“Now, why don’t these naysayers look at them?” asks Castelli. “The men outlive us by seven years, the women by four years .... The total vegetarians among the Adventists have only 15% of our heart-attack and cancer rates.”

**“Close to 90% of all coronary deaths could be prevented, if the cholesterol was kept below 182 mg%, blood pressure was under 120 mmHg, and no smoking or diabetes.”**

### Myths

## “In 40 years, we never found a heart attack in anyone with cholesterol below 150.”

“And if you think that a heart attack will just kill you, you’re wrong,” continues Castelli. “Many people end up disabled from a heart attack. And you could have a stroke. Some 25% of people go into a nursing home and never come out; 50% drag around the rest of their lives.”

Castelli has also debated the role of body fat in heart disease. Recently the National Institute on Aging said that gaining a pound a year was not detrimental for older people and could even be beneficial.

Castelli’s response: “Telling Americans to gain weight is insane. That’s when you get an increase in

blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol and triglycerides (blood fats associated with heart disease).”

Then there’s the salt/blood pressure controversy. There are those experts who say that decreasing dietary salt will only reduce blood pressure for those who are salt sensitive—a trial and error proposition. Castelli, however, says that salt reduction should be a matter of course for all Americans.

“We’d see a dramatic fall in blood pressure and an even more dramatic fall in cardiovascular disease,” he says.

But here’s Castelli’s biggest gripe: The myth of the 70-year-old. “The medical profession thinks that if you’ve made it to 70, you’re home free. And besides, you’re going to die any day now, so why bother? But at 80 when you have a heart attack, they’ll do a bypass on you and other expensive, invasive things. Now, if they can do that when you’re 80, why can’t you prevent a heart attack when you’re 70?”

Castelli started his own prevention program as a direct result of the study. Then in his 30s, his cholesterol was in the 270s. “Every Wednesday we’d review who had heart attacks. One number kept jumping out at me: Cholesterol 244. Here was mine up at 270 and people were having heart attacks at 244. That’s when the light turned on.”

### Personal Changes

Castelli started jogging every day and cut down on his dietary fat. He brought his total cholesterol

If you want to produce coronary artery disease in monkeys, all you have to do is feed them an average hospital diet.

But if you want to reverse the coronary artery disease in these monkeys, all you have to do is feed them a simple, low-fat vegetarian diet. The problem with Western medicine is that **you’ve got to be a monkey to get proper dietary treatment for heart disease!**

—William Castelli, MD

down to 190 and raised his HDL (good cholesterol) to a healthy 63 from a former 49.

And, he insists, a healthy diet and lifestyle don't have to take the pleasure out of life. By simply substituting low-fat foods for high-fat ones and taking brisk walks several times a week, a person can significantly decrease the odds of suffering a heart attack. "I'm alive to prove it!" he says.