



ASK DR. BOB

Advice from our in-house doc

RUSSERT REEXAMINED

Q Seems as though Tim Russert did almost everything right. He was under a doctor's care, took his meds, didn't smoke — yet he's still dead of a heart attack. Any lesson here the media missed?

A I knew Tim Russert from when I worked at NBC News as a medical correspondent, but I hadn't seen him in a while (other than on TV) until last summer, when I ran into him on Nantucket. "Hey, Tim," I said, "my mother is your biggest fan!" "Give me your phone," he said. He called my mother and spent 10 minutes thanking her. It made Mary's year.

He was one of the kindest and most unassuming men I ever had the privilege of knowing, but as far as his health goes, neither Tim nor his doctors did everything right. The media did a good job finding out that his main risk factor was metabolic syndrome, which is characterized by abdominal obesity, high cholesterol, low levels of "good cholesterol," raised blood pressure, resistance to the effectiveness of insulin, increased inflammation, increased tendency for blood to clot — an extremely toxic mix. This potent package is an incredibly fast way to grow enormous blockages in coronary arteries in a very short amount of time. People with it are twice as likely to have a heart attack as those who don't.

But what's really scary is that a quarter of American adults have metabolic syndrome, yet it's poorly diagnosed and treated, largely because each individual component is not that alarming. Doctors completely miss the boat in the 300,000 patients a year who die suddenly from heart disease. And, as in Tim's case, more than 50 percent of all men who die of coronary heart disease have no previous symptoms.

Nonetheless, if I had been Tim's doctor, I surely would have noticed that he was overweight and a workaholic, and would have at least given him an angiogram. An angio, during which iodine dye is injected into the bloodstream so doctors can see clogged arteries, might have saved his life, and I'm shocked that he wasn't given one. Even if surgery were not indicated, his angiogram would have instilled panic at most doctors' offices and led to very aggressive medical treatment.

But the most important preventive measure Tim could have taken was something the media mostly missed. Lip service is given to diet and exercise, yet the heavy emphasis is placed on widely promoted medications

such as cholesterol-lowering drugs. The media scoffs at serious and effective low-fat, vegetarian diets like Dr. Dean Ornish's, or really rigorous exercise. We're sold on walking up a flight of stairs and exchanging margarine for butter instead of playing a real sport and taking the food we put into our bodies seriously. In most stories that I've read about Tim's death, reporters were simply astonished that cholesterol-lowering medications and some modest lifestyle changes failed to work. What they should have been talking about is how Americans need to wake up and realize that good cardiac health requires more vigilance than a prescription and zero-trans-fat potato chips. We need to take an honest look at how we take care of our bodies and be more proactive.