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### ON THE HEART BEAT

I. Over a million Americans have atrial fibrillation, a condition that usually causes no severe symptoms, but is felt as heart palpitations and shortness of breath during exertion. AF is the indirect cause of 75,000 strokes a year and, according to some experts, up to half could be prevented with drug therapy. The American College of Chest Physicians urges anyone who's been told he has atrial fibrillation *but isn't receiving drug treatment* to revisit a doctor to see if medication is indicated.

AF, which can be detected by an electrocardiogram, occurs when the upper chambers of the heart vibrate instead of vigorously pump, thus allowing the blood to stagnate and clot. If the clots break off and travel to the brain, they can clog vessels and cause a stroke. Many doctors consider blood-thinning drugs too risky for most patients, but a recent review of five major studies found that, at low doses, the benefits of drugs far outweigh the risks.

A toll-free, nationwide hot line has been established to give the public more information: 1-800-4AF-1925. Callers will also be sent a brochure describing AF symptoms, risks and treatment options. —AP

II. Heart-attack survivors who can't reduce high cholesterol levels are in danger of having another heart attack. But what about coronary-artery-disease patients and heart-attack survivors who already have desirable levels of total cholesterol (TC)? A study by researchers at The Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions shows that in patients with desirable TC, *low* HDL (high-density lipoprotein, the "good" cho-

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lesterol) is "strongly predictive" of future cardiovascular "events," including heart attacks and cardiac death.

Identifying coronary-artery-disease patients with low HDL levels—less than 35 mg/dl—should become a priority, conclude the researchers. Dr. Michael Miller, chief author of the study, cautions that since HDL levels can vary, individuals should have theirs tested at least two times before worrying about a low reading. Even after a confirmation is received, it's possible to raise low HDL levels with drugs—or, as Miller recommends, first by exercise, weight loss and stopping smoking.

—American Heart Association news release