

William Castle Devries Encyclopedia Article

William Castle Devries

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William Castle DeVries

1943-

American Surgeon

On December 2, 1982, Dr. William C. DeVries successfully implanted the Jarvik-7 artificial heart, a plastic and titanium pump powered by compressed air, in the first total heart replacement intended for permanent use. The recipient survived only a few months with the device, illustrating the limited potential of the Jarvik-7 and other artificial replacement hearts as they currently exist. Efforts to develop an improved artificial heart continue.

DeVries was born in Brooklyn, New York, on December 19, 1943, the son of Hendrik and Cathryn Castle DeVries. He earned his B.S. degree (1966) and his M.D. (1970) from the University of Utah. He served his internship at Duke University Medical Center in North Carolina, and went on to an eight-year residency in general and thoracic surgery. From 1979 to 1984 he worked as professor of surgery at the University of Utah. During this time, he continued to perform surgery—including the historic implantation of the Jarvik-7 heart.

The Jarvik-7 artificial heart, designed by American physician Robert K. Jarvik, used a pump made of plastic and titanium to deliver compressed air through two tubes inserted in the patient's abdomen. On December 2, 1982, DeVries performed an operation on Barney Clark, who was gravely ill and running out of options. Clark and his surgeons hoped that the Jarvik-7 would successfully replicate the functions of a natural heart, and for nearly four months it appeared that it had. After 112 days, however, Clark died. Later, other surgeons implanted Jarvik-7 hearts in four patients, each of whom died—though one, William Schroeder, lived for 620 days, or nearly two years. Artificial hearts have since been used primarily to assist weakened and damaged hearts, allowing them to recover, or as a temporary devices that allow patients to survive until a suitable organ is found for transplantation. Research and development on artificial hearts continues, however, because there are many more candidates for heart transplants than there are organs that can be used.

William DeVries. (Bettmann/Corbis. Reproduced with permission.)

In 1989, DeVries left his teaching position in Utah to form DeVries & Associates of Elizabethtown, Kentucky. He sits on the boards of numerous Louisville, Kentucky, hospitals, and continues to teach at the University of Louisville. A recipient of the Wintrobe award in 1970, DeVries belongs to a number of professional associations, including the American College of Chest Physicians. He has seven children.