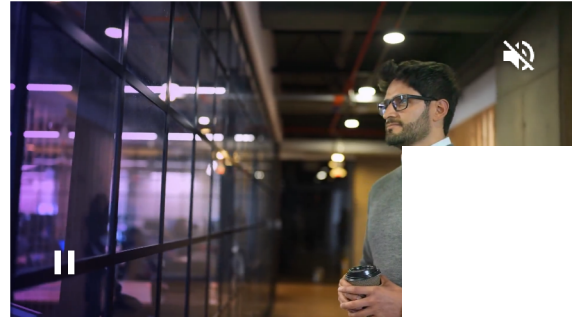


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Can Nancy Guthrie's Pacemaker Offer Clues About Her Disappearance?

By [Adaira Landry, MD MEd](#), Contributor. © Physician who writes about the...

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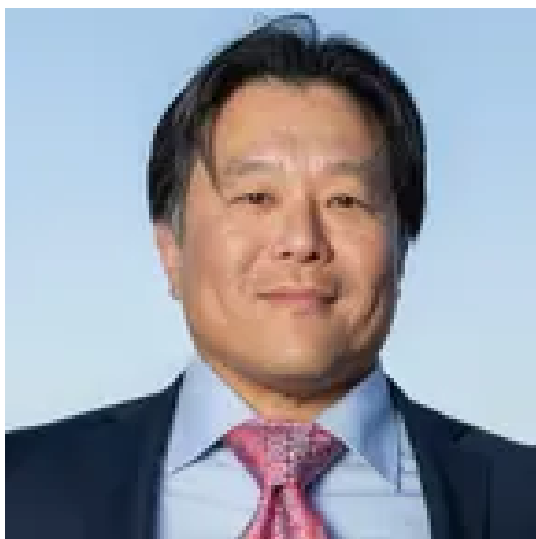
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Today show anchor Savannah Guthrie's mother, Nancy Guthrie, has been missing since Saturday night, and reports indicate her pacemaker stopped [connecting](#) via Bluetooth early the next

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principle is to monitor and treat the heart's electrical system," Chu explained.

As patients age, that system can weaken, slowing the heart and impairing chronotropy — the body's ability to adjust heart rate to changing needs. "This loss of rate control can make simple movements like sitting or standing more difficult," he said. In these cases, an implanted pacemaker delivers an electrical impulse to safely restore the heart rate when necessary.



Dr. Antony Chu
ANTONY CHU, MD

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connected to a pulse generator that can be replaced when the battery runs low. Newer leadless pacemakers are small capsule-like devices placed directly inside the heart with no wires. When the battery of a leadless pacemaker runs out, a new device is implanted alongside the old one rather than removing it.

Even when a person is away from home or not near a mobile device, the pacemaker remains self-sufficient. “It’s designed to function on its own,” said Chu. Its life-sustaining function does not depend on wireless connectivity, a charging station, battery life in a phone or the reliability of an app.

How Does A Pacemaker Transmit Data?

Pacemakers not only monitor and correct the heart rate but also send diagnostic information to a patient’s care team, usually through a portable monitor as the patient sleeps. Transmitting data at night over a short distance uses less of the pacemaker’s battery power, which allows it to last for years in a patient. The monitor, now typically cellular, sends encrypted updates to a digital system, where clinicians can later review the patient’s heart rhythm and check that the device is working properly.

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“Pacemakers are really designed to remotely capture data and then push it to the cloud,” Chu explained. The information sent is limited, technical and meant for doctors to review later, not for real-time viewing. Patient apps often show little more than whether a transmission occurred. Pacemakers are designed to keep the heart beating safely, “not to function like a live health tracker or GPS device,” he said.

In addition to recording heart activity, pacemakers can also help document inactivity, such as confirming time of death. “After a patient has died, we interrogate the pacemaker to help determine the time of death or what may have happened. Sometimes we’re even called to the morgue to do this,” said Chu.

Since Pacemakers Contain Patient Information, Are They Secure?

Pacemakers are not designed with the kind of cybersecurity people might expect from modern connected devices.

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they were doing, they could reprogram a device from several feet away, and it would be very hard to trace who did it,” he said.

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person's exact location, Chu explained.

But the data could still serve another purpose. Pacemakers record highly specific, time-stamped electrical information tied to that individual device — details that would be extremely difficult to fabricate. With the right equipment, commonly found in emergency departments and cardiology clinics, specialists can directly interrogate any device and retrieve recent cardiac activity.

In theory, Chu explained, if someone also had access to a compatible monitor and synced it with a missing person's pacemaker, it would trigger a transmission to the clinical platform that unmistakably shows the pacemaker is active and recording a missing person's heart's electrical signals. “You can't really fake that,” he said.

While this wouldn't reveal where a missing person is, it could function as credible proof that they were alive at a specific moment in time — without relying on a phone or other easily traceable technology.

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