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STAR EXCLUSIVE

'None of us expected him to survive': Coronavirus patient recovers after nine weeks on a ventilator in Toronto hospital's intensive care unit

By **Donovan Vincent** Housing Reporter

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Mario Castillo Tamayo was the first [COVID-19](#) patient to end up in Humber River Hospital's intensive care unit and he remained there on a breathing machine from late March to early June — about nine weeks.

At one point doctors in the hospital thought the 51-year-old was going to die because his oxygen levels dropped so low. "One of his doctors called and said my husband is 'getting worse, and we don't know if he will make it,'" said Castillo Tamayo's wife, Maricar Pagulayan, 40.

The doctor added that if her husband did survive, he'd be on a ventilator for the rest of his life, she recalled.

But Castillo Tamayo pulled through — miraculously, doctors say — and is now alert, speaking, eating and getting around with a walker. He is COVID-free after testing negative multiple times.

He recalls waking up in early June after months of sedation.

"I opened my eyes. I saw many people around me at the hospital. I didn't know who they were or where I was.

"For two months and a half I didn't see my wife, my stepdaughter," he said.

Just a few weeks after that glorious recovery, he's feeling good and thanking God for his "second chance," he said in an exclusive interview Thursday from his bed.

He left Humber River on Thursday to head across town to St. John's Rehab at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, where he'll remain for three to five weeks.

He's weak and has lost some movement in his feet. He has numb feelings on his head. He's gradually starting to move his fingers, having lost that ability likely a result of months of inactivity, doctors say.

The mechanic was at high risk for contracting the coronavirus given that he lives and works in northwest Toronto, a racialized portion of the city [hit hard by COVID-19](#) due to factors such as cramped living conditions. His wife and her sister-in-law also tested positive for the virus around when he did. Fortunately, they were not seriously ill and needed only to quarantine at home.

The couple live in a four-bedroom home with a basement unit. They share living space with Pagulayan's teenage daughter as well as Pagulayan's brother, sister-in-law and that couple's three children. No one else in the busy household had the virus — and no one at the hospital knows for sure how Castillo Tamayo pulled through, given that he was so critically ill for so long.

"I'm completely surprised. This guy was on full life support for a couple months where we were giving everything we could. And still he wasn't getting enough oxygen," said Dr. Jamie Spiegelman, an internal medicine and critical care specialist at Humber River, who treated Castillo Tamayo.

"None of us expected him to survive. He's been one of our biggest success stories, and I'm glad for him and his family," the physician said in an interview. In fact, Spiegelman said in a previous interview, "The fact that he recovered after a tracheostomy and all the feeding tubes ... is a little bit of a miracle, I think."

Born in Merida in Yucatan, Mexico, Castillo Tamayo works at the GFL recycling company on Arrow Road in North York. That's where he met his wife Maricar, who is from the Philippines and works in administration at GFL. The couple married in 2019 after meeting in 2011 and they travel together from their Jane St. and Sheppard Ave. area home to work and back every day.

Castillo Tamayo says around March 18 he came down with a fever at work. His boss told him to go home.

The fever worsened, and on March 24 he went to Humber River Hospital near Keele Street and Wilson Avenue. There, he soon received the news that he was suffering from the coronavirus.

"It gave me a scare. I thought my life was finished," he said.

On March 26, health still declining, Castillo Tamayo was admitted to the hospital's intensive care unit, where he was intubated. From that date all the way through April, Castillo was very sick — on full life-support, completely sedated.

The medical team had to "paralyze" him with the muscle relaxant rocuronium to stop him fighting the ventilator and ensure he could get enough oxygen, Spiegelman explained.

"Once we're happy they are sedated, we have to paralyze them. We take away all their muscular activity. The reason we do that is because a lot of patients, even sedated heavily, they still fight the ventilator. They still breathe above the ventilator, and we know when that happens their lungs get damaged," Spiegelman said.

The medical team also proned him, laying him flat on his stomach to help him get more oxygen, a few times in early April. That's a manoeuvre that has shown success in treating COVID but is tricky to execute when the patient is completely sedated.

"If you're on a ventilator with all these IVs going in, it's quite complicated to take a person who is sedated and paralyzed and flip them over safely," Spiegelman said.

The team would keep him on his stomach for about 16 hours, then flip him back for another eight hours. They watched his oxygen levels and assessed whether they needed to repeat the procedure.

"For him, it worked. He got better."

Over the course of April, the medical team tried to wean him off the ventilator and sedation. On April 26, they performed a tracheostomy. That meant his breathing tube was switched to his neck from his mouth, a more comfortable position. It was close to the end of May before he was completely weaned off the ventilator.

"His lungs at that time, based on X-rays, were damaged. We weren't even sure we would be able to get him off the ventilator because of how much lung damage he had from COVID," Spiegelman explained.

But about this time, things started to turn around for Castillo Tamayo. His wife received an unexpected — and very welcome — phone call. It was a doctor, and not the one who had told her that her husband would not live. A different doctor with a very different message: "I know that Castillo will survive," the doctor said.

"I was so happy. Fortunately God listened to me," Pagulayan said. She had fretted the entire time her husband was in the unit, unable to speak with, see or touch him given the COVID lockdown at the hospital.

Castillo Tamayo left intensive care on June 7 and improved rapidly. His tracheostomy came out on June 16, his feeding tube 10 days later. He gradually began speaking and eating.

He recalls, about a week after he opened his eyes, someone, a specialist, telling him to say the letter A then the letter R.

"He said 'say it stronger. Talk. Say your name.' I said 'Mario.' He said, 'Call your family. They missed you,'" Castillo Tamayo remembers. He called his wife via video chat, and later she passed the good news to family in Mexico — his three brothers, two sisters and two daughters from a previous relationship.

In terms of lasting complications, Spiegelman said Castillo Tamayo experienced significant lung disease due to the coronavirus, but his last chest X-ray showed the damage has mostly cleared.

"It is not clear if there is any lasting effect of this. But we know from the literature that patients with (lung disease from COVID) have respiratory mechanics that don't go back to normal over months and may take years," the physician said.

The doctor said it's unclear why some COVID patients treated in the ICU die while others pull through.

"We don't fully understand why. Genetics, co-morbidities (one or more additional conditions), fitness level. We don't understand it completely at this point," Spiegelman said.

Aside from the hard work of the multidisciplinary team at Humber River, including doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, dieticians, speech language pathologists, physiotherapists and a host of others, Spiegelman cites Castillo Tamayo's "relatively healthy" condition as something that may have given him an edge when it came to surviving.

"The only thing against him was he was a little overweight. The big risk factors for critical illness with COVID that we've noticed are being overweight, especially with young people, hypertension and diabetes. Those risk factors are almost universal for everyone who becomes critically ill," the doctor said.

Meanwhile, Castillo Tamayo is looking forward to the day he can go for walks again with his wife and stepdaughter, watch movies at home and barbecue.

He's also thinking about when he can get back to work.

"I have bills to pay."



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