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Helping to save lives in workplace

Defibrillators reduce fatalities by 60 percent

By CYNTHIA SWEENEY

The number one health crisis death in the workplace is by heart attack. But having an automated external defibrillator (AED) on hand can improve the chances for survival of a heart attack victim by about 70 percent.

So why don't all workplaces have one?

Reasons business owners give including cost and the misplaced fear of being sued for misuse of the device, said Tami Bender of Petaluma Health Care District's HeartSafe Community, which provides CPR and AED education and services.

"Businesses have a fear of liability for placing public access to an AED. However, they are covered under the Good Samaritan Law and the device is designed so that it cannot accidentally shock someone," she said.

The so-called California 'Good Samaritan Law' (Health and Safety Code Section 1799.102), put in place in 2014, says that no one "who in good faith, and not for compensation, renders emergency medical or nonmedical care at the scene of an emergency shall be liable for any civil damages resulting from any act or omission."

No one in the U.S. has been successfully sued by implementing CPR or the use of an AED Bender said, "The Good Samaritan Law has always prevailed."

There could be liability, however, if the device is not maintained by the owner. Under California law, AED's must be registered with the county's emergency medical service (EMS) and in compliance with a maintenance plan which requires periodic checking of the pads and batteries and reporting the check.

AED's work by electrodes that send information about the person's heart rhythm to a computer in the device, which figures out if an electric shock is needed.

Every device is also designed to detect the difference between a regular heartbeat and an irregular one. It simply won't work on anyone with a regular heartbeat, even when the shock button is pressed.

There are about 200 businesses in Marin County that have registered AED's, according to the Marin EMS.

In Napa, there are about 150 AED's registered with the county's EMS, however the majority of those are in government agencies like schools, said Brian Henricksen, EMS administrator. He noted it is a challenge to educate AED owners to register the devices. Although there is no penalty for not doing

so, a public access device can be added to a mobile app called PulsePoint which notifies users of the nearest AED.

The same is true for Sonoma County, which has about 500 registered AEDs, and there are about 200 businesses in Marin County that are registered.

About 60 businesses in Petaluma have AED's that are registered with HeartSafe Community, and Amy Pontius, owner of Riverfront Fitness Studio is one of them. Although she and her employees are trained in CPR and use of an AED, even for the untrained it is "impossible to misuse."

"It's so straightforward. When you turn it on you listen to the prompts and there is no way to make a mistake," she said.

There are also pictures on the device that indicate where to place the pads on the body, and by dialing 911, users can also get instructions from emergency medical services over the phone, Bender said.



Petaluma Fire Dept. Battalion Chief Jeff Schach shows off an automated external defibrillator to seventh-graders during a CPR training session at Kenilworth Junior High School in Petaluma.

According to the American Heart Association, cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in the U.S., and 10,000 incidents of cardiac arrest occur in the workplace annually. When treated with CPR and an AED before emergency medical crews arrive, survival rates for those who have cardiac arrest are about 70 percent. Without assistance from an AED, the survival rate is under 10 percent. According to a June 2017 survey by the American Heart Association, if a business has an AED, half of all workers in the U.S. don't know where it is, and in the hospitality industry that number rises to 66 percent. Also, more than half of workers, 55 percent, cannot get First Aid or CPR and AED training through their employer.

"The data suggests these untrained employees may be relying on their untrained peers in the event of an emergency, leaving employees with a false sense of security that someone in the workplace will be qualified and able to respond, when that is clearly not the case," said Michael Kurz, MD, co-chair of the AHA's Systems of Care Subcommittee in a statement.

Pontius only recently acquired her AED, although she had been thinking about getting one for some time. They are readily available online, at Walmart, and elsewhere. With an average price tag of \$1,800, the cost was prohibitive. She was aided by Arrow Benefits Group, which has set aside \$100,000 to place AED's in their local business community.

The Arrow Wellness Initiative is offering to pay half of the cost of an AED for its clients.

"Being a small business, our club has 45 members, finding the extra funding to purchase such an expensive piece of equipment is difficult. The cost is almost a deterrent," Pontius said. "I hope that changes in the future. This piece of equipment saves lives and there should be no price tag on that. Of course, we hope to never have to use it, but we are prepared just in case."

Riverfront was the first to receive one with Arrow's help, and so far, four other businesses have taken advantage of Arrow's contribution including Summit State Bank in Santa Rosa, KCM Investment Advisors, and RJ Ricciari, Inc., both in San Rafael, and Commonweal, in Bolinas.

"We are dedicated to helping our clients take proactive actions to keep their employees healthy and safe," said Andrew McNeil, principal at Arrow Benefits Group.

Arrow's donation also includes a one-year membership to the Heart Safe Community which includes CPR and AED education, and services to help AED owners be in compliance with California rules and regulations. Those include mandatory registration of the device with EMS, documented monthly readiness checks, and documented tracking of battery and pad expiration dates. AED owners are also contacted monthly to remind them to check the device, and remind them when it is time to reorder parts.

HeartSafe also offers complimentary AED check-ups for any existing devices, and can advise owners what needs to be done, if anything, to get the devices in compliance.

"It's just a matter of educating people on how safe and easy they really are to use," Bender said.

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