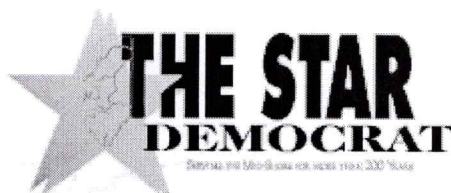


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**Editorial****Shock and awe**

12/02/2003

It's easy to take for granted the elaborate internal ballet that makes our daily lives possible. The heart contracts, pumping blood on its way to the lungs. Another contraction and it speeds along the intricate plumbing of the circulatory system with a load of vital nutrients and oxygen for internal organs, muscle and skin. All that, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, without a conscious thought. Unless something goes wrong.

Each year, about 250,000 Americans die from sudden cardiac arrest. Without warning, their usually reliable hearts go into an abnormal rhythm called ventricular fibrillation. The rapid, spasmodic contractions can't push blood. Victims collapse. Without help, they can die in minutes.

If the cardiac arrest were to happen in a hospital, doctors would shock a patient's heart back into a normal rhythm with a defibrillator. If paramedics arrived in time, they could do the same thing with a portable version. Otherwise, the best available treatment for many years was CPR. But too often, there was no one around with the proper training.

A few years ago, a new medical device, the automated external defibrillator, came on the market. It works just like the paramedics' machine, but it can be used by people with very little training. Once the machine is turned on, it prompts rescuers to attach a pair of wires to the victim. If it detects fibrillation, the machine charges itself to deliver a shock and warns rescuers to stand clear.

The results of a two-year study on the use of defibrillators in public places was presented last month at a meeting of the American Heart Association. It concluded that the machines can more than double the odds of surviving cardiac arrest. That could translate into tens of thousands of lives saved.

The Heart Association and local health agencies have been enthusiastic boosters of defibrillators. The American Red Cross now includes training on use of the automated devices in most CPR classes. Meanwhile, the number of machines in malls, airports and government buildings has grown rapidly. Thanks to a local effort, there now are several of the defibrillators in businesses and public buildings in Talbot County.

Those are all positive trends. It would be even better if more of the machines




were made available and more people signed up for training on how to use them. Each new machine, each newly trained person, increases the odds that someone who experiences sudden cardiac arrest will survive.

That's never something to be taken for granted.

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