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La Crosse nurses, AED save a man's life at airport

By *TERRY RINDFLEISCH* | *La Crosse Tribune*

A La Crosse man was in good hands Sunday when he had a heart attack in Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport after running with his wife while attempting to make a flight.

Three La Crosse nurses returning from a nursing conference in Las Vegas were able to use an automatic external defibrillator in the airport to save his life.

The three nurses — Franciscan Skemp's Karen Beneke and Michelle Johnson and Gundersen Lutheran's Vickie Hovell — were rushing to catch the same flight to La Crosse, only to learn at the gate it was delayed.

Johnson, director of Franciscan Skemp's Minnesota regional clinics based in Caledonia, Minn., said she had talked to the man and his wife, who were friends of her parents.

"I made some comment, joking, about the man not having chest pain because he had run," she said.

Moments later, people were yelling for help, she said.

The man had slumped over a chair, wasn't breathing and had no pulse, said Hovell, who is manager of Gundersen Lutheran's nurse adviser program.

She told others to call 911 and find a defibrillator, or AED. She and Johnson then started CPR.

Beneke said she and others had trouble locating an AED, and airport staff didn't know where one was kept in the facility. Someone else managed to bring one.

"It was one shock, and we did CPR for a little longer, and he came around," Johnson said.

Beneke said the man was talking as paramedics took him to the hospital. He later had heart surgery.

"CPR really helped, but the true lifesaver was the AED," Beneke said.

"But it was frustrating that airport officials didn't know where the AED was, and I think they all need to know that," she said. "One shock was enough to get a heartbeat back on him."

Johnson said it is important to make sure AEDs are easily accessible in public places. "Timing is the key to saving a life, so it's critical to find an AED immediately," she said. "This time, the AED was still there in a fairly timely fashion."

Hovell said her husband and daughter witnessed the incident, and afterwards, her daughter

hugged her. "She said, 'You're a hero,' and I said, 'No, I'm a well-trained nurse.'"

She said she sat quietly, took some deep breaths and said a prayer of thankfulness.

"This has never happened to me outside a medical setting," Hovell said. "You're so focused on what needs to get done, and your training just kicks in."

Johnson said other trained people helped with the situation as well, including a medic from Fort McCoy.

"I was very grateful that the man responded so quickly and so many people worked together as a team," she said.

The conference the three were returning from was about shaping the future of nursing. "Nursing is about saving a life," Johnson said.

Tri-State offers free AED reprogramming

Members of Tri-State Ambulance will inspect and reprogram all automated and external defibrillators, or AEDS, in the La Crosse area for free.

Many AEDs were placed in businesses, schools and public places before the American Heart Association changed its AED guidelines.

"We'll reprogram the defibrillator to match AHA recommendations and even check the batteries and pads," said Matt Zavadsky, director of Tri-State Ambulance.

Zavadsky said the process only takes about 10 minutes. Tri-State personnel also will register all community AEDs for future updates and allow the dispatch center to flag locations where AEDs have been placed.

Anyone interested in having an AED inspected and reprogrammed should call Tri-State at (608) 784-1127. Inspections will take place through May 31.

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