Why everyone should be trained to give CPR

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CPR saves lives—just not as many as it should.

That's because far too few Americans know how to perform it, so when people experience heart attacks in public, or in their homes, often there is simply no one around who knows how to help them. And with each minute that passes, the chances of surviving a heart attack decline. In fact, only about one in 10 cardiac arrest patients survive.

Cindy Huang, PharmD, 49, is one of the lucky ones. She was practically within sight of the finish line at this year’s Cherry Blossom 10 Mile Run, in Washington, D.C., when she collapsed from myocardial infarction. The only reason she survived is that bystanders knew cardiopulmonary resuscitation and immediately performed it on her.

One of those bystanders was AMA Chief Academic Officer Sanjay Desai, MD. He and Huang were reunited virtually in a recent episode of “AMA Moving Medicine” to revisit this harrowing experience and discuss why CPR training should be part of America’s high-school education.

The right place at the right time

“I noticed out of my peripheral vision somebody fall and then a scream,” Dr. Desai recalled, noting that another bystander who responded was an emergency medical technician, and they were quickly joined by another physician. “We found Ms. Huang unconscious and what appeared to be seizing. We put her on her side, but then I noticed that her pulse was going away and she became pulseless. So we put her on her back and started CPR in the middle of this 15,000-person race.”
It took them all of eight minutes to bring her back. Huang was then plucked from the course by a helicopter and flown to a local hospital. Three months later, she’s fully recovered and back at work.

“I keep thinking how lucky I was to have received immediate, high-quality bystander CPR,” Huang said. “This was by far the greatest factor to my survival.”

It shouldn’t just be a doctor thing

Of course, Dr. Desai got his CPR training in medical school.

"I'm an ICU physician. And in practicing, I've resuscitated hundreds of patients, but this is the first time out of the hospital," he said. “I can tell you without any equivocation this has affected me more than any other resuscitation that I've ever been part of.”

Maybe precisely because it happened outside of an intensive care unit.

“We know that bystander CPR can double or even triple someone's chance of survival,” said Comilla Sasson, MD, PhD. Dr. Sasson is vice president for science and innovation, emergency cardiovascular care, at the American Heart Association, and also took part in the interview.

“It's about meeting people where they are,” Dr. Sasson said. “Whether that's at a school, at an airport kiosk …”

Education has to change

COVID-19 might have scared some people away from the idea of learning CPR, but there’s a hands-only technique that everyone should know, Dr. Sasson noted.

“In just a minute or two, you can learn how to save a life,” she said.

You don't have to blow into the person’s mouth. All you have to do is push hard and fast in the center of the chest. And, of course, call 911.

Many people probably have never heard of this technique, because they have no formal training in CPR. But awareness is improving with changes in policy.

“We have advocated now for the last almost 10 years to have CPR training be a part of high-school graduation requirements,” Dr. Sasson said, noting that almost 40 states now mandate it. “If you go to
cpr.heart.org, we have a ton of free resources that not only you can use for yourself and your family, but also hopefully help promote to other folks, as well.”

Learn about AMA policy on physician proficiency in basic and advanced cardiac life support, and on CPR and defibrillators.

“AMA Moving Medicine” highlights innovation and the emerging issues that impact physicians and public health today. You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version, which also features educational presentations and in-depth discussions.