

Bystanders have an obligation to perform CPR, physicians say

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OTTAWA—Don't just stand there, do something.

That's the recommendation from emergency physicians who say too many Canadians are dying from cardiac arrests because bystanders refuse to help.

The doctors are pushing for a renewed campaign to teach Canadians how to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

But they say bystanders who have no training at all in CPR have a moral obligation to do chest compressions that could be enough to save a life.

"You cannot harm a cardiac arrest victim. You cannot do CPR wrong. Doing something helps," said Dr. Christian Vaillancourt, an emergency physician at the Ottawa Hospital.

He's one of the authors of a new position paper that calls for "strong inducements" to give Canadians the training to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

"It must become a moral obligation and a social expectation that bystanders will perform CPR when they witness a cardiac arrest," said the paper released by the Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians on Thursday.

"The victims of cardiac arrest will almost certainly die if lay witnesses do not intervene," the paper says.

Each year, more than 20,000 people in Canada suffer a cardiac arrest and less than 2,000 survive. But while heart attack victims are three to four times more likely to survive if they receive prompt CPR, that happens only 25 per cent of the time, the association says.

Boosting that to 50 per cent would save 2,000 lives a year in Canada.

"It is not acceptable that vast numbers of witnessed cardiac arrest victims do not receive bystander CPR," the association said.

Doctors say bystanders are reluctant to get involved because they either lack the training or they fear their CPR skills are rusty, "leading to hesitation and inaction."

But they say everyone has an obligation to act, even if they've never been trained in CPR.

"All Canadians should respond and provide chest compressions (with or without mouth-to-mouth ventilation) whether they are trained or not, when an adult, child or infant suddenly collapses," the paper said.

Still, emergency doctors say CPR should be a "life skill" known by every Canadian.

To make that happen, the doctors are targeting young people, saying CPR training should be a prerequisite to graduate from high school. That training is already a mandatory part of the high school curriculum in Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta, according to the Advanced Coronary Treatment Foundation.

Since 1997, the foundation has helped more than 260,000 Toronto students receive CPR training.

The emergency doctors are also urging tax breaks for companies that provide CPR training and individuals who take it.

They want a focus on senior citizens, the population most likely to witness a cardiac arrest and be in a position to respond.

The recommendations were welcomed by Toronto paramedics, who too often arrive at the scene to find no one is helping the victim.

“That’s lethal for the patient,” said Peter Macintyre, spokesperson for Toronto Emergency Medical Services.

He urged bystanders to step in and said EMS dispatchers reached through 911 will help with instructions on how to perform CPR.

“It’s a scary thing. But one thing to remember is the person is dead. They have no pulse, they’re not breathing. They’re dead. Nothing you’re going to do to them is going to make that any worse,” Macintyre said.

“Do CPR and they’ve got a chance. Don’t do CPR, their chances diminish very quickly.”