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Reading, writing... saving lives

By Sarah Payne - The Tri-City News

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Port Moody secondary school Grade 10 student Chris McBeth (second from left) and classmates perform a CPR demonstration at the school Friday morning during a press conference about the addition of a CPR course at the school.

COLLEEN FLANAGAN/the tri-city news

If you ever have the misfortune of experiencing a heart attack, you may be lucky enough to have a high school student nearby.

Starting this year, Tri-City secondary school students will be learning CPR through a program of the non-profit Advanced Coronary Treatment (ACT) Foundation of Canada. The nation-wide initiative has already trained nearly one million youth across the country; in B.C., the program has been implemented already in 137 of the province's 270 schools, and its launch in the Tri-Cities adds another 10.

"The importance of this program really can't be overstated," Port Moody-Westwood MLA Iain Black said at a demonstration event Friday morning at Port Moody secondary school.

That's because 85% of heart attacks happen at home and the sooner CPR is started, the greater the chance of survival — four times greater, to be precise. Those few minutes before paramedics or firefighters arrive can make the difference between life and death.

The national program is possible through community partnerships. Once a school commits to implementing the program, the ACT Foundation (www.actfoundation.ca) handles all the fundraising and training needs. Envision Credit Union's charitable foundation donated \$19,800 to buy 285 CPR mannequins (it has donated nearly \$160,000 for 18 B.C. communities), and the BC Ambulance Service and paramedics' union train high school teachers to be CPR instructors.

"The premise is school ownership," said Sandra Clarke, executive director of the ACT Foundation. "When the school owns all this, they can take it and run with it over the long term. It

becomes a regular part of the curriculum and, that way, schools aren't dependent on hiring an outside agency every year, because that's not sustainable."

Teachers learn the technique in a one-day training program and the course can be taught in just four hours — it's up to the schools whether it's done in one afternoon or spread out over several classes.

And it's not just the physical technique of cardiopulmonary resuscitation that kids are learning. The "four R's" of CPR start with knowing the risk factors for cardiovascular disease, which is a perfect opportunity to tell kids about the diet and exercise habits they need to develop now to prevent heart disease later on, Clarke said.

The second is how to recognize a developing medical emergency like a heart attack or stroke, and then how to react by asking the right questions, taking charge and calling 911.

The last one is the chest compressions and breathing techniques of resuscitation. Students also learn how to handle choking situations with the Heimlich manoeuvre.

Clarke said students have been empowered to respond to emergencies such as heart attacks, drug overdoses, drownings and car accidents, and they're helping to save lives.

"In emergencies, people often look to adults to respond but this program gives kids the confidence to react," she added. "And by inserting it into the curriculum, it becomes a natural life skill."

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