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Firm's safety manager uses device, training to save worker



Staff photo by Bob Hammerstrom

Jim Burnham, left, holds the AED device that Wayne Gibson used to save his life recently at Worthen Industries in Nashua. Burnham was driving a forklift when his heart stopped beating. Gibson, a certified EMT, was called and used the device to shock Burnham's heart, along with CPR. It worked, and now Burnham has a tiny defibrillator inside his chest to give him a jumpstart, if needed.

Hattie Bernstein

Saving a life is business as usual for emergency medical workers.

But for Wayne Gibson, the occupation, health and safety manager at Worthen Industries in Nashua, saving a life was frightening and extraordinary.

On March 3, Gibson, 35, saved a man's life in the company's plant, using his CPR, American Red Cross first aid training and an automated external defibrillator.

The company had put the AED into service just 19 days before 64-year-old Jim Burnham, who works in shipping and receiving, was stricken.

Gibson found a blue-faced Burnham lying on the floor, gasping for breath.

"Your initial response is, 'Wow. This is serious, frightening,' " Gibson recalled. "You feel this enormous pressure on you to make it better, a lot of pressure."

Time was of the essence.

Burnham's heart stopped, and Gibson knew that for every minute a stopped heart is in

arrest, a person loses a 10 percent chance to survive.

Immediately, he turned on the AED and followed a voice prompt that instructed him to attach pads to the victim's chest, then "stand clear," avoiding contact with Burnham while the machine analyzed his heart rhythm.

The AED will send an electric shock to the heart after recognizing either of two abnormal heart rhythms that are life-threatening.

Later, Burnham's doctor told him that if he had had to wait for the fire department to arrive, which took about four minutes, his chances of survival would have been 50-50 or less.

"They did everything right, and it really made a difference, said Dr. Steven Beaudette, Burnham's cardiologist at St. Joseph Hospital. "It's one of those stories that really makes you smile."

Beaudette said the heart can stop during a heart attack and will not restart without defibrillation. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation can temporarily maintain blood flow, but it won't restart the heart, the cardiologist said.

"Timing is everything with the AED," Gibson said. "You get the pads on him. The AED determines if a shock is advised. There are steps."

Part of the rescue process involves administering CPR, chest compressions and rescue breaths given at two-minute intervals as directed by the AED, followed by the "stand clear" message that precedes an analysis by the machine, then further instructions.

If shock is advised, the AED directs the rescuer to repeat the cycle of chest compressions and rescue breaths.

Gibson said he repeated the cycle on Burnham four times before fire department emergency workers arrived, about 4-1/2 minutes after the call went out.

"They arrived on the scene. I gave a report to them, and the fire department took control of the scene," Gibson said.

Burnham, a Nashua resident, said he has no memory of what happened.

"I was looking at the clock thinking about what I wanted to do before I went home, and I woke up in the hospital," he said.

Burnham returned to work a month later and is working full time again. He said he's

doing "wonderfully."

"All companies should get a hold of this machine," he said.

Meanwhile, Gibson is spreading the word at Worthen Industries, which employs 104 people.

He said the machine, powered by a small battery, is designed for use by the layperson. The unit is smaller than a laptop computer and simple to use.

"You turn on a button and a computer-generated voice walks you through the steps. It's designed visually, with few buttons, and the buttons blink. It's very user-friendly."

Gibson, who has an interest in "all things medical" and plans to pursue a second degree in nursing, is a certified Red Cross first aid instructor, trained to teach CPR and use of the AED.

He said Worthen Industries took advantage of a state-funded grant to purchase a unit for about \$700, almost half of the retail price. The company also purchased a cabinet for the device.

"An AED to a company can be a costly thing," Gibson said. "But you have to look at it from the point of view of a life, which is priceless."

Coincidentally, the American Heart Association this week announced it has changed its CPR recommendation. People are now being told they can skip the mouth-to-mouth breathing and just press on a person's chest to save a life. The experts say they are hoping the change will encourage more bystanders to step in and help if they see someone collapse suddenly.

According to the new directive, a responder has to do only two things: call 911 and push hard and fast on the middle of the victim's chest.

The AED, however, increases a person's chances of survival, a strong argument for making the units more available at businesses and among the public, Gibson said.