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Heart defibrillators are appearing in condos, clubs around S. Florida

By Jeremy Milarsky
Staff Writer

February 21, 2005

The paddles paramedics use to shock people back to life may someday become as common as a glass-encased fire extinguisher on the wall.

In condominiums and clubhouses around South Florida, automatic external defibrillators are popping up on walls, under security guards' desks and in fitness rooms. The devices, which can save someone suffering a heart attack, have become cheaper and easier to use, particularly in the past decade.

The technological and economic developments have not gone unnoticed by some of Broward County's politicians. Already, three Broward cities have passed laws compelling some business owners to keep a defibrillator on site.

"We're definitely in a transition period," said Brian Webster, a vice president at Medtronic Emergency Response Systems, a Washington-based company that builds and sells the defibrillators. "I think what's going to happen is ... you'll begin to see action against facilities that don't carry these, where there's a lot of traffic."

South Florida has begun to see such cases. In December, the family of Alessio Tringali, 49, of Fort Lauderdale, who suffered a fatal heart attack at an Oakland Park fitness club, sued the club owners, arguing the man's life could have been saved had there been a defibrillator in the building.

While Florida law does not compel anyone to have the devices, some of Broward's cities do. Last year, commissioners in Weston and Coral Springs passed a law requiring defibrillators in some government buildings and businesses.

Sunrise legislators on Jan. 25 passed a law similar to the one in Coral Springs, requiring the devices in restaurants with more than 100 seats, large fitness clubs and hotels. There's been a push for such laws in other communities, such as Plantation, where condominium leaders in the community of Lauderdale West recently acquired a device for their clubhouse.

Although laws have not been as common in Palm Beach County, the county's school board recently

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agreed to spend \$250,000 to make sure each campus had a defibrillator, and the city of Boynton Beach was honored by the American Heart Association last year for its efforts to distribute the devices.

There has not, however, been a push for the devices from the insurance industry. Fitness clubs with defibrillators are unlikely to get a better deal from their insurance companies, said Anita Byer, who owns Setnor Byer Insurance and Risk in Plantation.

"They would not benefit from an insurance standpoint," Byer said. "Insurance carriers are usually concerned about the misuse of such a device."

Sunrise commissioner Don Rosen, who got the idea after hearing about the law in Coral Springs during a meeting of the Northwest Council of Mayors, said he was not fazed by the cost of the devices. The defibrillators can cost between \$1,500 and \$3,000.

"The benefit far outweighs the cost of the unit," he said.

Training someone to use the devices has also become easier. For example, on their company Web site, device manufacturer Royal Philips Electronics shows a 5-minute video showing how to revive a victim with one of their defibrillators.

They used to cost much more. In 1997, a defibrillator cost the Broward County government about \$3,500. Now the county gets them for about \$1,500, said Todd Leduc, assistant fire chief for the county.

As the devices have become more affordable, they have also become easier to use, the Heartstart FR2-Plus sold by Royal Philips Electronics uses electronic text and sensors to tell an amateur rescuer exactly when to shock a heart-attack victim.

Firefighters in Coral Springs and Weston say they have not seen a documented case of a private person using a defibrillator on a heart-attack victim before paramedics arrive.

One of the few such cases happened in Hallandale Beach, where government employees have given out the devices, but haven't started compelling business owners to keep them.

It happened a year ago at a fitness club in Hallandale Beach. Mark Pomerantz, a dentist who works in the city, was jogging on the treadmill when he "heard a thud," he said. The man next to him had fallen, suffering from a heart attack.

Pomerantz grabbed the defibrillator, kept in a box under the front counter, and used it on the man, who happened to be a patient of his. The man survived.

Pomerantz, who had taken a refresher course in CPR the day before the rescue, doesn't think people should use the devices without getting some training. But he does think they should be all over the place, encased in glass and mounted on walls like fire extinguishers.

"I'm in 100 percent agreement of that," Pomerantz said.

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