

A lesson teenagers can take to heart

By RAHUL GUPTA, SPECIAL TO THE STANDARD

February 6th, 2010

Valerie Burtnyk thinks it's harder to say "defibrillator" than it is to use one.

A Grade 9 student at St. Francis Secondary School in St. Catharines, she was part of a group of students at the school Friday demonstrating the ease of using automated external defibrillators to save lives.

Clad in her school uniform, Valerie, 14, and her partner, Jessica Menchella, carefully attached the pads of the box-shaped device to a demonstration mannequin and followed its automated instructions.

"Once I learned how to use one, it was pretty easy," she said afterwards. "It tells you everything you need to do step-by-step."

Valerie and classmates were part of a news conference announcing plans to equip St. Francis and the rest of Niagara's high schools with automated external defibrillators.

Provincial Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Jim Bradley told the school's staff and students of his government's plan to ensure the devices are available in all 30 of the region's high schools this year. As well, 5,700 Grade 9 Niagara students will receive training in the use of defibrillators. The devices can quickly deliver an electric shock to a heart that has stopped beating.

The initiative is the result of a public-private partnership involving the Ontario government, the ACT Foundation -- a first aid advocacy group sponsored by four pharmaceutical firms -- and lead sponsor FirstOntario Credit Union. The financial institution will contribute funding for enough defibrillators for the 23 schools in the region that do not currently have the devices as well as foot the bill for the training program.

Bradley said students will learn how to save lives inside and outside the classroom, a change from first-aid training for previous generations.

"Young people across our school system are going to be able to carry out activities that no one would have thought of 20 years ago," said Bradley, MPP for St. Catharines.

ACT Foundation executive director Sandra Clark said the plan will empower students with the necessary tools and knowledge to save lives quickly, both inside and outside the classroom.

"Current and future generations will know exactly what to do if they should ever need to save someone from cardiac arrest," Clark said.

The plan comes at a time when the rate of heart disease among young people has skyrocketed.

A recent report from the Heart and Stroke Foundation warned of an impending health-care crisis because young Canadians have higher cholesterol and blood pressure due to poor diets and lack of exercise, making them increasingly at risk for heart disease.

Emergency physician Doug Munkley said having defibrillators in schools will save lives in addition to encouraging students to take better care of their personal health.

"Your choices will determine how your heart health will be," Munkley, the medical director for Heart Niagara, told the students. "You can save someone else's life with this box that shocks and you can also save your own life by making healthy decisions."

Valerie said her newfound knowledge has made her more aware of her health. She's planning to stay away from unhealthy foods.

"No more chili fries," she said with a laugh.