

Heart attack? This neighbourhood watch deals with cardiac arrests

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WOULD you volunteer to be responsible for your neighbours' lives? This is what three people have done at Marine Drive Block 61.

Their aim: To help give the victims of sudden heart attacks significantly more than a 2-per-cent chance of survival which, according to Dr Dana Elliott Srither, is the current rate in Singapore.

The First Aid Corps – Dr Elliott's brain-child – are three volunteers trained in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and the use of the automated external defibrillator (AED)

– a portable device that advises the rescuer if an electric shock is needed and provides it.

When someone suffers a heart attack at home, a family member first calls 995 and then the volunteer, who will rush to the home to start the resuscitation procedure.

In the United States, on-site application of CPR and AED has seen 50 to 75 per cent of victims survive a cardiac arrest. But both have to be administered within five minutes of the attack – and in Singapore, it takes longer than that for an ambulance to arrive, said Dr Elliott.

“It's a very small window of opportunity,” noted the general practitioner. Two out of three heart attacks happen at home, he

said. Last year, Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) ambulances attended to some 71,496 medical cases, with an average response time of about 11 minutes.

Dr Elliott – who is the medical director at LifeResus, a local AED distributor – got the live-saving scheme into motion when he approached local centres that train people in AED and CPR and found three volunteers living in the same area.

To safeguard their privacy, volunteers' identities are not revealed until there is a need for their services. Instead, at Block 61, each

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household is given two stickers carrying the mobile phone number of the volunteer on duty. The three take turns, ensuring that for at least 20 hours a day, someone is on standby.

Believed to be the first of its kind here, the project was launched on Feb 24 by Dr Elliott and Member of Parliament (MP) for Marine Parade GRC Fatimah Lateef, herself a long-time AED advocate.

Noting Singapore's "very low" survival rate for heart attacks, Dr Fatimah called this "a unique project" offering residents a critical lifeline almost 24 hours a day.

Dr Elliott hopes to expand the project but he needs at least three volunteers a block to undergo training, as well as sponsors.

For each block, the cost of the AED kit, a mobile phone and training totals about \$9,000 for a period of 10 years – two battery life cycles of the AED.

This works out to an investment of just 60 cents a month, he stressed. Currently,

LifeResus sponsors Block 61.

MPs TODAY spoke to were supportive of the initiative, but had some concerns.

Sembawang GRC's Dr Lim Wee Kiak was "keen" on a pilot programme in his Canberra division, but like Ang Mo Kio GRC's Dr Lam Pin Min, he stressed the importance of having properly-trained volunteers.

Also, Dr Lam asked, would these volunteers be sued if anything untoward occurs because of their resuscitation effort? Singapore, he pointed out, does not have a Good Samaritan law, one that protects someone who tries to offer medical help in an emergency.

Jalan Besar GRC's Dr Lily Neo wanted to see how successful the Marine Drive project would be first. She also said it could be difficult to find volunteers in housing blocks where residents are mainly the elderly.

Meanwhile, Mayor of the South West District Amy Khor – whose Community Development Council recently taught 250 residents CPR skills and distributed training kits – said there were different

ways to achieve the same ends.

"We feel that a broad-based approach to equip more in the community will serve this purpose (of saving lives in the nick of time), while boosting neighbourliness," she said.

She added that when the Singapore Heart Foundation (SHF) finds ways to mitigate the high cost of the AED for community use, "we would be happy to work with them".

The Singapore Red Cross and the SHF were supportive of the First Aid Corps and wanted to see the project expanded. The Red Cross would eventually like to see at least one person in every home trained in CRP and the use of an AED, said the chairman of its medical commission, Associate Professor Goh Lee Gan.

For now, the SCDF hopes for more like-minded people to come forward and provide localised help. "Such initiatives are very encouraging and can truly help enhance the survival chances of any unfortunate victim," said its director of public affairs, Mr N Subhas.

