

LUTHERAN HEALTH MINISTRIES of the FOOTHILLS

Marcia Brinkley, RN, Parish Nurse

The term “First Responder” brings to mind firefighters and paramedics, but in medical emergencies, the first person to respond is often a family member, friend or bystander who happens to be there on the spot when things start to go wrong. And the actions of that person can have a huge impact on the outcome of the situation. Will you be ready if you are the one on the spot?

Ironically, not long after I started sketching out this article, our quiet Saturday evening at home was shattered by the sound of a head-on collision. We flew out the door to find what looked like a small war zone just beyond our driveway – mangled cars, moaning victims, glass and bits of metal everywhere. A small crowd had already gathered, one woman on her cell phone calling 911 while others peered into the wreckage. By the time the emergency vehicles arrived, the victims had all been assessed, carefully extricated from the vehicles, and wrapped in blankets to ward off shock. Fortunately, there were no serious injuries, but it was wonderful to see how many bystanders were ready and able to do what was needed.

Even in less dramatic circumstances, minutes can mean everything. Stroke, for example, is the third leading cause of death in the United States, and a leading cause of serious, long-term disability. About 600,000 new strokes are reported in the U.S. every year, 80% of which are caused by a blood clot that cuts off blood flow to the brain. (The other 20% are caused by hemorrhage from a broken blood vessel in the brain). In cases where the stroke is caused by a blood clot, the patient may be eligible for treatment with intravenous t-PA (tissue plasminogen activator), which can be very effective in dissolving the clots, but only if he or she gets to the hospital within the first 60 minutes after the symptoms begin.

Unfortunately, only about 1 in 50 stroke patients (or 2%) get to the hospital within the first 60 minutes. Helen, for example, took some Tylenol for her headache and went to bed. When she woke up 2 hours later, her speech was slurred and her left side was weak. Although she got to the hospital room within an hour after waking up, it had been more than 3 hours since her symptoms started, so she was not a candidate for t-PA.

Symptoms of a stroke include the SUDDEN onset of any of the following: Numbness or weakness of the face, arm, or leg, trouble speaking, or understanding speech, trouble seeing in one or both eyes, trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination, severe headache with no unknown cause.

Your knowledge and preparation may make the difference in saving your own or someone else’s life.