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Defibrillator grants “seven lives” to railway station father of three

A Sydney electronics technician and father of three survived a cardiac arrest at Redfern railway station thanks to a Cardiac Responder state-of-the-art automated external defibrillator. Doctors told the 52-year-old he had died seven times during his ordeal. But swift action by a RailCorp employee means the man will celebrate his 53rd birthday with family next month.

When Finland-born Harri Paananen used to fix defibrillators some 24 years ago, he could not have known that one day they would save his life. But that's exactly what happened after he started feeling 'a bit crook' at work just before 11 AM on 30th April. Harri asked a workmate to drive him to nearby Redfern station so he could take the rest of the day off and see a doctor.

“When we got to the station the pain got so severe I had to sit down,”

Harri told Cardiac Responder. “A cleaner saw me and said: ‘You don't look well’. He took me to the station manager’s office where I met Tom (Baghdadi). I asked Tom if I could sit down. But the pain got worse and I said I needed to lie down. That's when things started to cloud over.”

In fact, Harri died there on the floor of the station manager's office. But swift action by RailCorp station manager Tom Baghdadi saved Harri's life.

When Tom had asked Harri if he wanted an ambulance, Harri, who had never been in a hospital in his life, said no. Then Harri's condition deteriorated before Tom's eyes. So Tom rang an ambulance anyway. About 10 minutes later, Harri had a sudden cardiac arrest.

According to official reports, Harri, by this stage, had no pulse and was not breathing. That was at 1105. Tom and transit police officer Paul Philipp grabbed an automatic external defibrillator from a nearby room, opened it and placed its pads on Harri just one minute later. Philipp commenced CPR, and the AED quickly assessed the situation. By 1107 it had given Harri his first automated shock. Paramedics arrived three minutes later.

Harri remembers very little of the ordeal.

“As far as I was concerned I was in a beautiful deep sleep. I only remember waking up once. That was Tom with his defibrillator. The next time I remember waking was a couple of days later in the ICU.”

Harri says he later learned that paramedics had to use a defibrillator on him repeatedly during the emergency ride from Redfern station to Royal Prince Alfred Hospital at Camperdown. He understands he ‘died’ seven times in all. By the time he awoke in the intensive care unit two days later he had had double bypass surgery and doctors had installed an internal defibrillator, which will automatically swing into action should Harri's heart give him anymore bother.

Harri's work colleagues were the first to visit the ICU and Harri's three children - who were a little further away at Emerton, near Mount Druitt - followed soon after. Harri has lived in Australia since he was nine, more than 40 years. He lives with his daughter Aimee, 22, and her daughter Brianna, 4, Harri's granddaughter. Aimee drove her brother Daniel, 17 and Harri's second daughter Tara, 14, to Camperdown. Harri understands his children were shocked when they first saw him in the ICU. But when they learned he was starting to get better, he reckons they cheered. But it wasn't until a week after the incident that Harri had sufficiently regained consciousness to see them.

“It was bloody beautiful. It felt weird though. Because you're thinking: “I should be dead”.

When Cardiac Responder spoke to him this week, Harri – who used to walk 45 minutes every day - was busy recovering. And he had taken a major step forward - a 20 minute walk to the shops.

“On a scale of one to 10, I'd say my fitness level is a two. But it's improving day by day. And the aches and pains are disappearing hour by hour. My rib cage stopped being sore from the surgery only yesterday.”

Sudden cardiac arrest kills around 30,000 Australians each year, more than breast cancer, shootings and road crashes combined. But early defibrillation can significantly improve the chance of survival.

Not everyone is as lucky as Harri. An ambulance may arrive too late, or there may be no AED at hand. Swift access to an AED can significantly improve the chances of making it through a massive heart attack.

So far, RailCorp has installed 87 AED systems at Sydney's busiest railway stations. A further 17 AEDs are still to be fitted on Countrylink trains.

Until last month, Harri hadn't given a second thought to his experience of servicing defibrillators all those years ago. Now that's changed.

“They are an aid in a situation that can get very nasty, like what happened to me.”

And when the quietly spoken Harri again met RailCorp's Tom Baghdadi after his ordeal was all over, he thanked Tom. Profusely.

“What can you say? I thanked him very, very much.

“If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be here.”