

Cooling treatment saves cardiac patient

By: Benita Zahn

ALBANY - Agnes Phillips woke up at 5 a.m. because her husband's breathing didn't seem right.

When she couldn't wake him, she called 911 and started CPR.

What happened next made medical history in the Capital Region.

"So I had a total disconnect in terms of where I was and where I ended up," said Bernie Phillips.

That's because from Saturday, Jan. 3 to Tuesday, Jan. 6 Bernie went from death's door to the ranks of the very much alive.

It started when he suffered a cardiac arrest.

"Obviously, we've beat some pretty long odds," said Bernie.

For starters, his wife started CPR -- a critical first step. Then there was quick EMS response and his heart was restarted.

Ninety-five percent of those stricken with cardiac arrest don't survive and of those who do, only 10 to 15 percent recover without brain damage.

So when Bernie came thru A-Okay, doctors marvelled.

"And for a rare instance in my career I was absolutely speechless. It, in fact, it works," said Dr. Gary Bernardini, a neurologist at Albany Medical Center.

What works is a new weapon -- cooling the patient. Special cooling pads lowered Bernie's body temperature to 92 degrees and kept it there for 24 hours.

The cooling slows chemical reactions in the body that can damage the brain when blood flow is restored to the heart. In essence, the cooling gave his brain a vacation.

"It's amazing something so obvious and low tech can be so effective, but it's true," Bernardini said.

It took Albany Med about a year to develop the cooling protocol as it involves the emergency department, cardiac and neurology specialties. Bernie, who's still a patient at Albany Med, was the first person they used it on.

Now that it's worked, they plan on using it for others including stroke patients and perhaps one day, spinal injury victims. EMS crews, like the one that helped save Bernie, may also use cooling devices.

While coronary artery disease is usually the reason a heart stops beating, it's still not clear what made Bernie's heart stop.

But one thing is for sure, the fact his wife started CPR and immediately called 911 was a big part of saving his life.

"Every day it was just one amazing recovery, you know, milestone after another. It's just been amazing," said Agnes.

Bernie and Agnes have two young sons. Everyone's hoping he'll be home in Latham by the weekend and back teaching physics at Schenectady High School soon after.

