Un-extraordinary Measures: Stats Show CPR Often Falls Flat

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In his 20 years of practicing emergency medicine, Dr. David Newman says, he remembers every patient who has walked out of his hospital alive after receiving CPR.

It's not because Newman has an extraordinary memory or because reviving a patient whose heart has stopped sticks in his mind more than other types of trauma. It's because the number of individuals who survive CPR is so small.

In fact, out of the hundreds of CPR patients who have come to St. Luke's Hospital in New York, Newman recalls no more than one individual a year making a full recovery.

Since it was introduced to American physicians in 1960, cardiopulmonary resuscitation has become a staple of emergency medicine. Between 2011 and 2012, more than 14 million people in 60 countries were trained in CPR administration, according to the American Heart Association [1] (PDF).

But recent studies suggest that the number of lives saved by CPR isn't as many as your favorite TV police drama would have you believe.

Initially, CPR combined mouth-to-mouth breathing with chest compressions to keep blood and oxygen circulating throughout the body until further measures could be taken to restart the heart. In 2008, the American Heart Association began teaching "hands-only CPR," in which the rescuer pushes down hard and fast in the center of the chest -- about 100 compressions per minute -- and forgoes rescue breaths.

The new CPR procedure was developed to simplify the process and eliminate the "yuck factor" that potential rescuers could associate with putting their mouths on an unconscious victim. Studies showed [2] that the modified procedure was as effective as chest compressions combined with artificial respiration.

Yet despite advancements, the overall effectiveness of CPR remains disappointingly low -- although the practice still has its defenders.

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