

A heart-starter on the wall

Shocking death rates show that Camberwell needs more, and better placed defibrillators, as *Daisy Packwood* discovers

Fewer than one in twelve people will survive a heart attack if it happens outside the care of a hospital ward.

It is a frightening statistic given that most seizures will happen in the home or the street, sudden and devastating, such as the recent death of former Scottish SNP leader Alex Salmon who collapsed at the dinner table after making a speech.

But access to a defibrillator, which applies an electric charge to the heart to restore it to a normal heartbeat, can reduce the death rate by up to seventy percent if used within three minutes of a person going into cardiac arrest.

It is the reason that the London Ambulance Service has started the London Heart Starters campaign to get the "defibs", as they call the little red or green boxes with AED written on the cover, installed in communities across the city.

The latest figures by the service show there are 150 London communities which need access to defibs, including areas of Camberwell. And, typically, it is the poorer communities that miss out on essential services.

It is a disturbing and complex picture, confirmed by the British Heart Foundation which says that only half of the twenty-five defibs within a two-mile radius of the Camberwell town centre are accessible 24/7. The others have restricted access, dependent on the opening times of each business location. Those placed in schools, for example, have extended periods of the year in which they are inaccessible.

It is a serious issue that Southwark Council has begun to tackle, with twenty machines installed across borough libraries and leisure centres. On this, councillor Kieron Williams, leader of Southwark Council, said: "We are delighted to have fulfilled our commitment to install



Society Chair Nick Mair locates the defibrillator outside Camberwell Library
Photo: Ahmed Kamara

defibrillators across public spaces in Southwark."

But only seven are accessible at all hours, and the Council did not respond when asked if there were any plans to increase the accessibility of defibrillators in the area.

The message strikes home when you talk to people like Camberwell resident Jackie Highton who lost her sister last March when she had a heart attack in the street. The memory of her death is still raw.

"My sister died just weeks after the birth of her first grandchild," Ms Highton told the *Camberwell Quarterly*. "Her life could have been saved if we'd had access to a defibrillator. When the heart stops there is no time to start researching where to find a defibrillator. Each of us needs to know in

advance the location of our nearest machine and its available access.

"These machines do save lives. I was interested to hear from the person to whom I spoke at the Denmark Hill Station that they had had an occasion to use a machine right there on the platform. I think the importance of your article is in raising awareness of the whole subject."

Orla McCarthy, another local resident, said that not only were more machines needed, but they needed to be put into better places: "Sadly, the timing of heart problems cannot be controlled," Ms McCarthy said. "It is unfair to those who live, through no fault of their own, in 'Defib Deserts' as they've been called by the ambulance service. It means they are at a much greater risk of death.

"Rather than a continued focus on the increase in the number of defibrillators, it would be wise to see a movement towards increasing the accessibility of devices already in existence by re-placing them on external walls of buildings to adequately support the health and welfare of those of us in the Camberwell area."

There are ten defib locations in central Camberwell. Find them on the map:

McDonalds (Butterfly Walk), Bronx Boxing Club (Vicarage Grove), Camberwell Green Surgery (New Camberwell Road), Southwark Primary Care Trust (Grange Walk), Tesco Express (New Camberwell Road), Sharp Raiser Ltd (Camberwell Passage), Camberwell Library (Camberwell Green), Michael Rutter Centre, London Central Bus Company (Warner Road).

