

A real classy heart starter

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health reporter

FOR cheeky Oliver McNally the most important piece of equipment at school is not his pens, pencils, books or even the playground.

It is the defibrillator that will shock his heart back to life should it suddenly stop.

Prep student Oliver, 5, was diagnosed with the potentially fatal congenital heart problem "long QT syndrome" in November.

His mother Sue, who often does voluntary work at school, was also diagnosed with the syndrome last year.

Family members were tested after Mrs McNally's brother had a heart attack and was dragged, clinically dead, from a Geelong pool.

He survived, but was diagnosed with long QT syndrome, so-called because of the unusually long gap between the Q and T wave points on an electrocardiogram or heart monitor.

This means it takes an abnormally long time for the heart to return to normal after contracting and pumping blood through the body.

Physical exercise, emotional shock or surprise — even an alarm clock going off — may trigger a fast, irregular and lethal heartbeat.

When this happens, no blood is pumped out of the heart and the brain is deprived of blood, causing sudden loss of consciousness and possibly death.

It is likened to having a time bomb in the chest and is thought to kill 20 to 230 people in Australia each year. Often sufferers have no symptoms until a fatal attack.



It could save his life: Oliver McNally shows his Kew Primary classmates the defibrillator that can restart his heart. Picture: MARK SMITH

St John Ambulance has donated the defibrillator to Kew Primary School and trained 10 staff members to use it.

St John Ambulance superintendent Darren Johnson said having a defibrillator nearby hugely increased the chances of survival.

For every minute defibrillation is delayed after cardiac arrest, a

person loses 10 per cent of a chance at life.

The long QT diagnosis was a shock for the Kew family but knowing there is a defibrillator at Oliver's school has given some peace of mind.

"We're still reeling from it," Mrs McNally said. "It's reassuring because if he were to have cardiac arrest at school, if his heart was restarted quickly it reduces the

likelihood of any permanent damage."

Oliver is the youngest of four boys but luckily his brothers seem to have escaped the clutches of the syndrome.

The defibrillator was provided by the Australian Government Public Access Defibrillation project, which gave money to St John Ambulance to install them in public areas.