

Medical ID bracelets go glam to save lives

March 11 2010, By William Hageman

You can have a brilliant idea -- roller skates for cats, for example -- but if the public doesn't buy into it, the idea is worthless. Take medical alert jewelry.

The notion goes back more than 50 years, when simple bracelets and necklaces noted a wearer's medical condition, a great idea that can help emergency personnel provide faster treatment. As smart of a product as it was, some people were reluctant to wear such items because they were so pedestrian. Who, after all, considers the rod of Asclepius a fashion statement?

"Traditionally, they've been fairly generic, not so attractive," said Rick Russell, president of American Medical ID, which for 16 years has been creating medical IDs that are more like jewelry.

The idea of devices that provide information for emergency personnel has since evolved, of course. But the most common items are still jewelry -- necklaces, bracelets, dog tags and the like.

They have gotten more stylish through the years and now come in silver, gold and titanium, some in leather, others even studded with semiprecious stones. At American Medical ID, where customers can build their own bracelet online (identifyyourself.com), prices range from around \$30 to \$700.

The fancier items, though, can keep medical personnel on their toes.

"We have to know to look for those kinds of things," said Connie Meyer, president-elect of the 30,000-member National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians. "They've tried to make them more attractive because that's one of the reasons women, in particular, don't wear them, because of the style."

The bracelets _ some come pre-engraved; with others you can have your own wording added -- can alert medical staff to dozens of conditions, including diabetes, emphysema, heart disease, allergies, asthma, autism, epilepsy, Parkinson's, or hearing, sight or mental impairments. Knowing quickly that a patient has an already diagnosed condition can make a difference.

Meyer estimated that only about 1 percent of the patients she sees as a full-time paramedic -- she's an emergency medical services captain for Johnson County Med-Act, an EMS network headquartered in Olathe, Kan. -- sport any type of alert jewelry.

"I think if you have a chronic medical problem that might make you unresponsive, then it's a good idea to have something," she said.

The medical alert items are not a cure-all, of course. Meyer said that one identifying a patient as a diabetic would help emergency personnel start treatment. But one that had a Do Not Resuscitate notation would require the EMTs to call an 800 number to verify the order.

"So sometimes it speeds things up," she said. "If we see a tag that says diabetic, then we'll go straight to checking the blood sugar as our first assessment. But we still do other assessments."

ABCs of medical bracelets:

Lengthy medical conditions can eat up space on a medical ID. That's why a list of abbreviations has evolved.

Here are a few of the dozens of standard abbreviations that are used:

ARDS: adult respiratory distress syndrome

BKA: below knee amputation

CXR: chest X-ray

qh: every hour

Hx: history

IDDM: Insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus

NPO: nothing by mouth

prn: whenever necessary

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