

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Erica Lynne Pratt was attending a math class at the University of Pittsburgh when she suffered a cardiac arrest. The 19-year-old undergraduate student collapsed and slumped to the ground.

A fellow student called 911 and campus police arrived quickly. But instead of helping, the first officer on the scene failed to provide aid to Erica and, according to students, prevented two students with CPR training from helping to resuscitate her.

The result of the incident on Feb. 2, 2004 was deprivation of circulation and oxygen that caused severe brain damage, leaving Erica unable to walk and with difficulty speaking. She requires assistance to feed herself.

The result was also a lawsuit, settled after five days of trial in September 2007 for very substantial financial compensation -- the settlement terms kept the amount confidential -- and a pledge by the university to improve emergency medical response.

As part of the legal agreement, the University of Pittsburgh police department will hire a qualified medical director and conduct quarterly refresher courses on CPR and the use of automatic external defibrillators for their police force. Those trained in CPR and the use of AEDs also will be tested twice yearly.

Evidence in the civil lawsuit indicated that Erica, an otherwise healthy young woman, could have been saved from serious harm had the campus police responded appropriately.

When the first officer arrived in the classroom, Erica was gasping. But this officer failed to personally assess Erica or to administer CPR for several minutes, until she had stopped breathing altogether. Two of Erica's classmates had CPR and AED training and offered to perform CPR when the campus police officer did not, but were instructed by him not to touch Erica until the paramedics arrived, according to students' testimony.

Despite boasts by the university on its website that all police vehicles were equipped with AEDs, this officer did not have an AED, which delivers an electrical current or "shock" that can revive a victim. A second officer arrived with an AED but did not use the device to revive Erica. In fact, he left the room with the AED to walk down a hallway and await paramedics.

When the paramedics did arrive -- an estimated 11 minutes or more after Erica collapsed -- they were able to revive Erica using an AED. But because of the time in which she experienced a lack of circulation and oxygenation, the young woman suffered devastating brain damage.

A Harvard cardiologist testified at trial that the performance of timely CPR and defibrillation would have prevented Erica's severe injuries. The ultimate success of defibrillation by the paramedics was a clear indication that use of an AED earlier by campus police would have achieved the same result before permanent damage had been suffered, he said.