

For family, alarm brings about awareness of silent killer

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Carbon monoxide monitor awakens Elses.

Roused from deep sleep in the middle of the night by loud beeping, Dan and Trudy Else and their daughter Becca found themselves out in the cold for awhile.

It all started about 1:30 a.m. a couple of weeks ago when Trudy and Becca arose to see the origin of the annoying noise.

Once they realized it was the carbon monoxide alarm, Trudy said they unplugged and re-plugged the alarm.

“ERR” showed on the display which, according to the manual, meant the device was not working properly, she said.

“So I unplugged it and went back to bed,” Trudy said.

As she tried to go back to sleep, she remembered a newspaper story she wrote about a family in Cozad which was lucky to escape alive when they discovered a carbon monoxide leak.

Trudy lives in Gothenburg, teaches in Cozad and also is a freelance writer.

Although none of the Elses had symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning such as headaches, dizziness or nausea, wondering whether the odorless gas was present weighed on her mind.

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She then called local police, thinking officers might have a carbon monoxide detector and opened the front door to let in fresh air.

“I hated to get people out in the middle of the night and it was very cold,” Trudy said. “But I knew it had to be checked out for our safety.”

Once Officer Joe Humphrey arrived, he was followed by six local fire fighters. They, along with Trudy’s husband Dan, checked the furnace which she said is an older model.

CAUSES, PREVENTIONS OF CO POISONING

Each year, carbon monoxide poisoning kills nearly 500 people nationwide and sends more than 15,000 to the emergency room, according to Two Rivers Public Health officials.

Although the Nebraska Regional Poison Center received 502 calls concerning carbon monoxide in 2010, the figure can be misleading, because carbon monoxide poisoning is often under-reported.

Just after the first of the year, 42 members of a University of Nebraska-Lincoln fraternity were evacuated from a house after experiencing headaches and other symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning. It was later discovered that a boiler was not venting properly.

The first step in treating carbon monoxide poisoning is getting the victim to fresh air. Then seek medical attention immediately. Carbon monoxide is a gas produced when fuels burn incompletely. It has no color, taste or smell.

The major causes of carbon monoxide poisoning include:

- Using heating equipment that is poor repair.
- Lack of ventilation in a car.
- Using a charcoal grill indoors.
- Using unvented space heaters.
- The poison center offers suggestions to help prevent carbon monoxide poisoning:
- Inspect all fuel-burning equipment yearly.
- Vent fuel-burning heaters to the outside.
- Do not use a gas range or oven for heating a room.
- Never use a charcoal grill or hibachi inside.
- Install carbon monoxide detectors on every level of your home.
- Never leave a car running in an attached garage, even with the garage door open.
- Have the vehicle muffler and tailpipes checked regularly.

The installation of new batteries stopped the beeping but the Else family still didn’t know if the detector was defective or carbon monoxide was seeping into the air.

“The only sure way to know was to call the gas company and have them send over one of their employees with their calibrated detectors,” Trudy said. “I hated to get anyone out of bed and into the cold but a local volunteer fireman encouraged us do that.”

Trudy said the volunteer said: “We don’t want to come back in the morning and pick up three bodies.”

A gas company representative from Cozad arrived, checked the house and found no evidence of carbon monoxide.

She said he explained that the plug-in detectors don’t last forever and need to be replaced

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every few years.

Because their detector was about seven years old, Trudy said they bought a new detector and fire alarms with new batteries the next day.

“We were lucky it was a false alarm because it’s better to be safe than sorry,” Trudy said.

She then wrote a letter to the editor which appeared in The Times and was willing to share more of the story to encourage everyone to check and replace older model carbon monoxide detectors and fire alarms.

Gothenburg fire chief Mark Ballmer said the department averages about three to four calls a year from residents with malfunctioning carbon monoxide monitors.

In the past two years, all have been from monitors that need to be replaced.

Ballmer recommends changing batteries in monitors, as well as in smoke alarms, every six months.

“You might do it when the time changes to remember,” he said.

The fire chief also suggests installing monitors on every floor of the house, especially near heating sources like furnaces.

“It’s a silent killer, usually caused by a malfunction of the furnace or by a plugged vent pipe,” Ballmer explained.

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If high carbon monoxide levels are suspected in a home, he said to call the local gas company which has

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