If the heart and lungs stop working unexpectedly, which may happen for example following a serious accident or heart attack, hospital staff will attempt to revive the patient.

The heart and lungs also stop working as a part of the natural and expected process of dying. If patients are already very ill or have multiple injuries or illnesses, the clinical staff may need to discuss the options and may consider the benefit of resuscitation if the patient is gravely ill and does not have much longer to live.
What does cardiopulmonary resuscitation mean?
Cardiopulmonary resuscitation, CPR and resuscitation, all mean the same thing – the emergency treatment to try to restart a person's heart and breathing if these stop. This means attempting to keep the heart and lungs functioning, by compressing the chest to keep blood circulating, and filling the lungs with air and oxygen using a mask, or by passing a tube into the lungs.
A controlled electric shock may be given to restart the heart, using a defibrillator.

How often is resuscitation successful?
On average nationally, one in every five resuscitation attempts is successful. Unfortunately the figures are much lower for patients with serious medical problems. The outcome depends on why the heart and lungs have stopped and what other illness the person may suffer from. The patient's general state of health will affect the outcome of resuscitation. Patients may survive an attempt at resuscitation only to have a further cardiac arrest a few hours or days later. This indicates severe and probably untreatable disease. The likelihood of long-term survival is very poor in such situations. Everybody is different and the healthcare team can explain what resuscitation could do for you.

What if the person has already decided they do not wish to be resuscitated?
Sometimes an individual may feel that their life should not be needlessly prolonged, because of chronic or terminal disease, or a very poor quality of life. Some people make an Advance Decision (previously called a Living Will or Advance Directive) to put their wishes in writing. It is important to tell the family and hospital staff so that these wishes are known. The hospital can provide a form to help ensure any such wish is expressed in terms which are likely to be legally binding.

Do people recover completely after resuscitation?
Each person is different. Some make a full recovery. When the heart and lungs stop working, the brain and body are deprived of blood and oxygen which can cause brain damage. The techniques used to try to restart the heart and breathing may lead to severe bruising and fractured ribs. People who are successfully resuscitated usually need to be cared for in a high-dependency unit for a little while afterwards.

Who decides whether resuscitation should be attempted?
A doctor or senior nurse will usually talk to the patient (or relatives if the patient is too unwell to make a decision). This is part of a general discussion and does not imply any special risk. Relatives can help staff if they know that the patient has previously made their views known, but cannot decide for the patient. These views, together with the likelihood of resuscitation being successful, will be taken into account in reaching a decision. If doctors believe that resuscitation would not work, that it would cause severe disability, or prolonged suffering they will advise against it. This does not affect any other treatments or care which may be appropriate for the patient's illness.

Why is it necessary to write in the case notes whether a patient should be resuscitated (or not?)
This is because in an emergency the on-call doctor may not be the doctor who usually looks after the patient and the staff must know immediately if resuscitation is to be attempted when someone's heart stops. If resuscitation is not appropriate for any of the reasons above, the patient's own doctor is better able to make this decision than a doctor who is unfamiliar with the patient.

Does ‘Do Not Resuscitate’ (DNACPR) mean not for active treatment?
Definitely not. There are many patients in whom an attempt at resuscitation would be unsuccessful, but for whom full and active treatment of their condition is entirely appropriate.