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NEWS

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***Divorce and stress in paramedics is addressed in emergency medicine class.

DALLAS--The divorce rate for paramedics, by national statistics, is fast approaching that of police officers -- 65 percent.

Like police officers, paramedics are faced daily with life and death situations. Being responsible for saving lives in itself is stressful. But paramedics deal with human beings in crisis situations, and verbal and physical abuse directed toward them is common. Paramedics must not only handle their own emotions but also bear the brunt of the victim's displaced aggressions such as denial, worry and guilt. Unlike police officers, however, they do not carry weapons and are not allowed to use physical force. Not only are they unprepared for the frequent hostile confrontations, but once in that situation have few outlets to vent disruptive behavior so that they can do the job at hand -- save the victim's life.

Diane Reid, EMT coordinator at The University of Texas Health Science at Dallas' Emergency Medical Services program, estimates that in nearly every class of paramedics (or EMT's) there has been at least one divorce. Many factors contribute to this problem and the EMS program is implementing some unique ideas to combat it.

"When you have a job and you've made a mistake and it costs you money, yes, that bothers you; but what if that mistake means a life? That's a very difficult question, and that's what a paramedic lives with. That's their world," says Dr. James Atkins, who co-directs the Emergency Medical Services with Dr. Erwin Thal, professor of Surgery.

The EMS program at UT Southwestern Medical School has long been recognized as one of the leading systems in the nation. In 1981 the program won "System of the Year" -- the only urban system to be awarded such an honor. Atkins attributes its excellence to many factors.

All EMS instructors rotate classroom, field training and continuing education responsibilities. This centralized focus on teaching results in a more well-rounded experience for both instructors and students. In addition, the program works in cooperation with Parkland Memorial Hospital's Emergency Room where, after five and one-half weeks of classroom, paramedics spend another five weeks training in one of the busiest ER's in the nation -- seeing nearly 180,000 emergencies per year. Because of this volume and because of the metropolitan area it encompasses, paramedics are afforded the chance to see trauma in greater numbers, severity and diversity than in many other urban hospitals.

To help paramedics prevent and combat stress-related problems, the program includes several lectures on stress on the premise that if early warning signs of stress are recognized and intervention begun early, many long- and short-term effects can be minimized.

However, because stress often manifests itself at home, the family is included in the training. During the first few weeks of each paramedic class (there are four per year), an orientation is held for the families of paramedics in the program. It is an opportunity for them to voice their concerns, discuss existing problems, and develop a network or support system of friends. In addition, they become acquainted with counseling services available. Rozalyn Katz whose husband went through paramedic training before the orientations were begun, emphasized the importance of mutual support. "I wish I had had another person to talk to. Even though I was boiling over with it, I was too embarrassed to call anyone and admit we were having problems."

The EMS instructors also developed a coloring book to help the children understand what their "mommy" or "daddy" does every day at work.

One of the biggest complaints voiced by families is that of depersonalization. "Unless the kids or I are within five minutes of death, he doesn't think it's serious," said one wife. There is a need for people in highly stressful occupations to develop a psychological protection so that they can professionally do their jobs. It's a necessary "hardening" that occurs in order to prevent total emotional breakdown, and paramedics see

so many serious accidents that it's often difficult for them to react appropriately when someone suffers a very minor injury.

Because many fire departments will terminate a fireman who does not pass the paramedic course, the class itself contributes to stress in a unique way. For five and one-half weeks, students spend eight hours each day in class -- nearly 220 hours -- and says Reid, an incredible amount of knowledge must be absorbed in that time. After the classroom section, paramedics spend another five weeks in clinical rotations at Parkland, and finally spend about four weeks in a Mobile Intensive Care Unit (MICU) in a high-activity area of Dallas. By necessity, paramedic school becomes the most important thing in their lives. "The family came second. Our life was put on hold for those weeks," said one wife. Many said their husbands were "not the men they married" and that it was particularly difficult for the children to understand why "daddy" wouldn't spend time with them anymore.

During the course, fights, irritability, insomnia, nervousness and varying degrees of altered personality states are evident. One wife related that her husband would arrive home from class, ask for dinner and immediately barricade himself behind his books. Literally everything he did at home for that month and one-half, he did behind a wall of textbooks.

Once the course is successfully completed, the paramedic returns to his duty station with a new set of responsibilities and with that, a new set of problems.

Nearly half the time, paramedics are dealing with a person who is drunk and belligerent, says Atkins, who is also associate professor of Internal Medicine and director of Community Medicine Emergency Services at UTHSCD. Those, he says, are commonly the people involved in car accidents, knifings and shootings. "Take a situation where you make a run and pick up a child who's been hit by a drunk, then you answer a few more crisis calls, and later you pick up someone else injured by a drunk driver. Near the end of the night, you're called to a family dispute, and you go in and are cussed out by someone who is drunk. Can you hold your emotions? For a lot of people that would be the breaking point. You want to take out all the frustrations of all those injured people you've taken care of on that drunk. But a paramedic can't, and that's part of what makes their job so stressful."

"My job has been responsible for both the lowest and the highest points of my life," says Sherrie Wilson, a paramedic who graduated from the course here in 1979. The hardest thing for her to deal with, she says, is knowing what to say to parents of victims. Recently, for example, the MICU on which Wilson rides was called to a scene where a five-year-old girl had been hit by a car. "Instead of stopping, the driver got scared and drove off, but in doing so, drug the little girl about 50 feet. In the ambulance, her mother kept asking me what she should do. I said, 'We've done everything we can. All we can do now is pray.' The mother said, 'I don't know how to pray.' And so all the way to the hospital I prayed for that little girl. But it's very disheartening to think that it just wasn't God's will for her to live."

Pressures paramedics put on themselves are also responsible for anxiety. The EMS program tries to help them cope with these and allow themselves to realize that they are "only human" without disregarding the importance of doing their job without flaw. Paramedics and firemen, as a group, says Atkins, have a tremendous amount of pride. They are skilled technicians who view themselves as helpers and also feel they have an extremely high public image to live up to. Their job is to save people's lives, to be "heroes," and they are devastated when they encounter hostility from the public and family and friends of the victim or when the situation is beyond their control and the victim dies.

Early in their careers, paramedics tend to set impossible goals for themselves. They want to believe they can be perfect--never suffer burn-out, never tire and, most important, never let anyone die.

All these demands place excessive stress on their and their families' emotions, and the way in which they deal with this constant anxiety has a direct effect on their job performance, personal lives, health, and ultimately, life expectancy.

Channeled properly, stress has many positive rewards. Tolerance, increased ability to love, adapt, take on responsibilities, laugh and relax are all signs of effective stress management. Paramedics and their families often are more sensitive to needless hostility and appreciate the precarious balance between life and death. "We realize that time spent together is precious and shouldn't be wasted on unnecessary arguments," said Katz.

Immediate stress is best handled on a daily basis. Healthy ventilation -- exercise, sex, tears and laughter -- is encouraged; but most important paramedics and their families are urged to talk openly about the job and the situations encountered. The worse the experience is, the greater is the need to talk about it. Since paramedics work in 24-hour shifts, they have opportunity to share experience with the other paramedics but the need to talk extends into the home and open communication is necessary.

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"One of the neatest things," adds Wilson, "is when you do CPR and bring a person back to life. And another is when a doctor pats you on the back for doing a good job, for doing the right thing."

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PHOTOS AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST.

NOTE: Stress lectures will be presented on May 24, June 1 and June 8. The spouse orientation is scheduled for May 29 at 7 p.m. on the campus of UTHSCD.