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Where did they all go?

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In a short time there will be a crisis. The national terror level will not be raised, even though it should be.

In a short time many paramedics will see their “contracts” come to term. These bastard children of the modern fire service will be able to finally untie themselves from the burden that has held them underfoot in the eyes of their peers for so long.

In a short time they will quit. Most will not quit on that day. The process will be slow and will not be dramatic. Its full effects will lay invisible until a critical mass is discovered and then the official crisis will be declared.

In a short time.

And the sad fact of this short time is that no one believes me.

To become a paramedic requires a tremendous amount of time, effort, and dedication. Such a large amount of those three items is required that the motivation cannot be a mere sum of money.

Note: Money is shown time after time in study after study to be a piss poor motivator.

Why do they all want to quit and where do they all want to go?

They all want to quit because 24 hours of taking really sick people to the hospital is much too long. Cognitive function starts to fail somewhere around the 16th hour. Personality is lost somewhere around there too. Other things begin to fail, compassion among them. Other things begin to surface, apathy, anxiety, and effort.

The longing becomes not for what is in the interest of the greater good, the primary motivation becomes the desire for quiet and for rest, and finally for sleep. The sleep never comes though and if by some stroke of blind luck it does come it is never restful. You lay there waiting for that buzzer, siren, horn, or other grating sound to signal you to rise into the dark night. This goes on over and over again for years. They all want to go to that place where you really don't have to do much to get paid. They want to go to a ladder truck, where ever.

Then there are the people who argue that ambulance crews are up all night too. I agree.

Then there are the people who argue that we get more money so we should suck it up and go. I do not agree with them, furthermore I do not acknowledge their existence as rational human beings, so we will address the former statement in isolation.

The paramedic is up all night just like the EMT but they cannot be the same. If it were the same the paramedic would not have to go to all that extra schooling, they would not have to take a national test, followed by a state test, followed by a local exam, they would not have to re-certify every two years instead of every three. If the EMT and the paramedic were the same the paramedic would not exist.

What then is the difference? Both parties are up all night.

It is time to tell some basic truths.

The EMT does not need to think about much of anything. They simply arrive and take sick people to the hospital. In rare events they have to utilize a bag valve mask to ventilate a patient but then they rarely get that right. Every so often they have to intervene and help a patient self-medicate.

Yeah, I said it. Putting people on the stretcher, giving them oxygen and taking them to the hospital is not easy sometimes but rarely is there much thinking involved. You can do it with a GED and 135 hours of training. EMTs don't get into trouble because they make medical errors, they get in trouble when they fail to act in a basically humane way and mistreat patients, patients who complain.

The paramedic had better be thinking, both in the first hour and in the 23rd hour. He or she had best be thinking as clearly as a physician sitting in an air-conditioned office at nine in the morning, who just finished his morning coffee after a night of blissful sleep. The paramedic had better be thinking because that doctor is who is going to review the case if something goes wrong.

When something goes wrong the EMS world throws about words like negligence,

incompetence, and disregard, as if those words were generated in a black and white world without any levels of complexity and circumstance. The protocols do not make allowances for fatigue, nor for rain, nor for carrying a 400 lb. patient in a stair chair down six flights of stairs at three in the morning. ...and to top it off all your Captain can say is, "that's why they pay you more."

Being a paramedic is different because it is harder and so much is at stake. So much of a life can be ruined if that 40 year-old woman who "...just does not feel good" is actually having a heart attack. So much can be ruined if you give that child an adult dose of the wrong medicine. So much.

So much can be lost if a dopamine calculation, the same calculations that ER staff uses calculators to calculate and machines to regulate, is made incorrectly at midnight after having run 14 calls already. So much to lose; like your job, and your house and the money you use to keep that kid of yours in private school. Lost because you made a mistake in the middle of the night.

My detractors are thinking now that I am exaggerating the consequences of mistakes, and perhaps I am, but the stakes are high and anyone who denies that is misled.

My detractors say that the system wants merely to re-educate. But while the re-education program is prepared they take your license away, publicly humiliate you, put you at the receptionist desk at headquarters so that everyone knows something happened, hold you in limbo for quite some time and then they retrain you. It would seem that the retraining is a bit late.

I beat my dog for pissing on the floor right after he does it, not nine months later.

It appears to me that the investigation, the ambiguity, the humiliation; it seems to me that those things are punishment enough to render retraining a waste of time.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch someone leaves a few plates out on the table, a few trash cans to empty, a few floors to sweep because those paramedics still have to do their share of the housework. The firemen go to their fires and when they return they wake up the medics to help clean SCBA and re-pack hose. Where was my help after the working code at 0230 hrs, the same patient that vomited blood all over the back of the unit, the same patient that we emptied the drug box on, where was the help?

The medic officer is berated for making poor decisions on the fire ground more than the Captain who rides the fire engine everyday. Some things are sad....

In a short time there will be a crisis. The national terror level will not be raised, even though it should be.

People don't want to hear this. I am surprised that you are still reading this far down the page. People don't want to hear this because the paramedic does what the firemen claims as their own in the news interviews; they help people. They really do make a difference in people's lives...and they do it almost every single time they come to work.

...and then I am surprised that a firefighter who puts on his or her gear and rushes headlong into a burning building and rescues a lady who "unfortunately, later succumbed to her injuries." gets a gold medal for the effort and the paramedic who while kneeling on hot asphalt, or leaning over the seat in a dimly lit METRO bus, in the presence of a large crowd, intubates a patient with a bloody airway, bags the patient, gets all the medications right, starts a jugular IV left-handed, and sees the patient walking down the sidewalk three weeks later gets nothing. ...but then I can't be surprised because I see it all the time....I am no longer surprised and am now just disappointed.

...and few sit around the table telling tales about medics who did the deed well in all kinds of weather, and year in and year out...

In a short time the administration will dream of clever ways to address the medic problem. They should start with a change in priorities and perspective. This change will aid paramedic retention in ways that the inherently patronizing, ambiguously worded, contract cannot ever hope to do. Make people feel wanted and special, and convince them that you really care and you won't need contracts.

For all of you people smiling because I took a dig at the administration let me turn that smile upside down. Even if our administration did not care they are too smart to say that our loud. Even if the administration felt that medics were over-paid whiners they are too smart to say that. Even the administration thought paramedics were more trouble than they were worth they are not the ones at the station level who laugh out loud when the medic unit gets a call at dinner time. They are certainly not the ones that leave extra work for the medics to do when they get back from runs. They are not the ones who complain about having to "chase" the medic, who complain about having to help carry bags while the paramedics are starting IVs and pushing the stretcher.

In a short time I hope that they all realize that contracts don't work for retention for any period of time longer than the life of the contract. ...and in a short time I hope that the firefighters who go out of their way to berate paramedics are told to shut-up by officers who really care.

I am prepared to wait a long time.

Paramedic retention is as simple as it is painful. It is painful because the standards of contracts and money don't apply; no more than a band aid will solve the problem of a rectal bleed.

Paramedic retention is about creating a system where you are not punished for going the extra mile, you are not punished for taking a full year of your life to become someone who, oddly enough, is rejected by their peers.

I know a paramedic who lost his engine driver status because he forgot to set the parking brake on the engine that he hardly ever drives. He lost his driving status for a simple error. I know a paramedic who was getting yelled at by his Captain for not knowing where the ABC extinguisher was on the fire engine. This paramedic listened intently as the Captain berated him, as that Captain explained that part of the job was knowing where stuff was, and on and on and on. When the Captain took a breath the paramedic asked the Captain where the BAAM was on the medic unit. The conversation was over.

There are standards and there should be. People should not be allowed to run about without regard for rules, be it on the medic unit or the fire truck. There are rules because there has to be. So now that we got rules where is the "fair?"

BUT and that is a big but...

Don't give me static for being a medic until you know your fire rules, your fire protocols, as well as I have to know my medical protocols. Don't give me static until you get placed at headquarters to answer phones after you burn down a house after blatantly disregarding the SOPs. Don't give me static when you drive the engine everyday and still can't draft or drive the truck everyday and still don't know how to level the turntable properly.

Don't give me static and maybe that one day we hope never comes when you get burned because you failed to follow the fire rules there will be a medic there to give you the morphine you need.

I told some hazmat guys the other day that one day they were going to get a hole in their Level A suit (the bright green moon suit). Everyone agreed that it might happen, God forbid. I went on to tell them that when that happened and they were exposed to some crazy chemical and they saw the light at the end of their personal tunnel that they would have to pause when their lives flashed before their eyes; pause to consider where all the paramedics went.

I don't think they heard me.

This essay is dedicated to the medics who were brave, who were smart, and who found a way to be just as nice to patients at three in the morning as they were at three in the afternoon, Jon Fiedler, Joe Becker, Monty Crown, Mary Jane Rolen, Mike McAdams, Ronnie Watkins, Audrey Deputy, Bob Lienhauser, Nelson Irey and others....None of you went to that fancy medic school in Baltimore but I never once saw either of you flinch. Thanks for the inspiration 'cause I still have 18 months left on my contract.