

Getting back to the basics of emergency medical care

by Melanie HESS



"9-1-1" It is the first phone number most parents teach their children and an avenue to life-saving medical care during crisis. Unfortunately, in recent years, the healthcare community has seen a spike in what it commonly refers to as chronic users, individuals who may call 9-1-1 hundreds of times a year with non-emergency complaints.

"When 9-1-1 systems are utilized in a chronic way for episodic healthcare, the entire system suffers," explained Dr. Sharon Malone, an emergency medical services (EMS) physician.

EMS response times for life-

threatening situations increase and hospitals experience a shortage of doctors and beds. Combined with recent legislation, which requires hospitals to pay a fine for individuals admitted and discharged for the same cause within 30 days, the result is an increase in the overall cost of care for everyone.

Advanced Practice Paramedic

Whether a patient is embarrassed by illiteracy, unaware of social services to help with healthy meals for a heart condition or lacking the financial or transportation resources to routinely

visit a physician, many patients find themselves in situations where 9-1-1 appears to be their only avenue for seeking care.

Concerned with this issue in local communities, Collin College, in conjunction with the McKinney Fire Department and Dr. Malone, created a unique program, Advanced Practice Paramedic (APP). APP helps cut down on unnecessary 9-1-1 calls by providing experienced paramedics with the in-depth medical knowledge to evaluate and treat these patients in their homes.

In turn, these trained APPs, or community paramedics, educate, investigate and aid frequent 9-1-1 callers in ways that allow them to maintain full and healthy lives, keeping them off the caller list and out of the hospital.

How It Works

"What we found in analyzing these frequent calls was a distinctly common problem of patients with unmet needs," Dr. Malone said.

Through addressing patients' needs, the team aimed to accomplish three goals: healthier, happier patients; avoidance of unnecessary emergency room visits; and increased availability of ambulances for true emergencies.

When a patient is identified as a candidate for the program, they are visited at home by an APP and receive a full evaluation. Following this, the APP provides the patient with the education necessary to care for him or herself and connects them with social services, such as Meals on Wheels, community activities, transportation services and a host of other services.

"With the privacy of APPs visiting patients in their own environment,

walls come down and we can identify and aid people with those non-medical issues that keep them calling 9-1-1," Dr. Malone said.

Through this, they develop relationships that Dr. Malone notes may be difficult for physicians to establish.

Why Paramedics?

Trained in medicine and experts in the local population and geographic area, paramedics are the medical industry's first link to the community and a natural fit for the APP role.

Unfortunately, as Dallas Fire Department Lt. Montreves Wesley, an APP course student, explained, there is a deficit between a paramedic's emergency skills and the abilities involved in long-term health care.

"They understand an emergent setting, but that's not the physician perspective or patient interviewing skills they need," said James Shiplet, Collin College EMS Education Coordinator.

Paramedic and APPs have different objectives. EMS responders are expected to move from the scene to the ambulance in 10-15 minutes, evaluating quickly for the specific complaint reported.

"As an APP, the goal is to make the patients' overall lives better," Dr. Malone said.

Students in the APP course spend nine weeks learning techniques from Dr. Malone, Shiplet and Fire Science/EMS Director Pat McAuliff. In the course, students learn to critically think on a new level, which Dr. Malone describes as comparable to that of a physician's assistant or nurse practitioner.

Congestive heart failure, diabetes, lung diseases, kidney failure and psychosocial problems, such as monetary issues or loneliness are the top five, often interrelated, causes for 9-1-1 repeats, so instructors emphasize information specific to those issues.

Students become experts in how to apply their knowledge of medical system, social service and pathophysiology in order to properly evaluate and examine patients at home and in a holistic manner. They also develop an understanding, that in the eyes of the patients they touch, they

are becoming a medical provider. Collin College's simulation laboratory is used to master specific patient-APP paramedic interactions.

"With our high-fidelity manikins, we can simulate almost any health condition that we, as humans, may possibly experience in real life," said Jackie Langford, Collin College Director of Healthcare Simulation. "When necessary, we can address specific issues and go back and re-run scenarios for clarification and reinforcement purposes."

Community, National and Economic Impact

Danny Martin, another APP student, who readily shares his experience observing the start of the first-ever APP program in Red River, New Mexico, is part of the Arlington Fire Department's Emerging Issues Committee. With the committee's recommendation, Arlington Fire Department is now pursuing the implementation of its own program.

Martin said freeing up the time of emergency services by providing community programs like APPs is extremely important.

"Ambulances for emergencies aren't available, and they should be," Martin said. "The program also gets us out in the community, getting to know people, and that's an important part of our job."

"To our knowledge, this is the only course that provides the critical pathophysiology education to the paramedic that enables the paramedic to function as a physician extender in the field." Dr. Malone goes on to say "the Collin College APP education program has been sought out by many other departments across Texas and the nation."

For more information about the Advanced Practice Paramedic course, contact James Shiplet at jshiplet@collin.edu or 972.548.6848. ❖

Melanie Hess is a public relations associate at Collin College.

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