



OTTAWA'S UNSUNG HEROES

HOW PARAMEDICS
RISK THEIR LIVES 24/7
to Serve the Community
they Love

A CUPE 503 Briefing Paper



Some years back, funny-man, Rodney Dangerfield, made comedy history with his famous throw-off line, "I don't get any respect." While definitely funny when Dangerfield said it about himself, it's anything but funny when applied to Ottawa's paramedics who are out there 24/7, risking their own lives so others can live. Dedicated professionals who never seem to get the respect and honor accorded to other health care and public safety professionals such as police, firefighters and hospital staff.

And to make matters worse, new and more serious threats to their status as highly respected professionals are on the horizon. Such as the push by firefighters in some parts of the province to defend their budgets in the face of falling workloads by having paramedics put under their control. This campaign – which paramedics are resisting forcefully – is all the more worrisome since it comes at a time when a few municipalities, driven by a need to cut costs, are toying with the idea of handing off some paramedic duties to less well trained firefighters. In short, risking people's health and safety – just to save a few dollars!



photo by Christopher Payne

Which, taken together, seems to suggest a certain lack of appreciation for the work paramedics perform and the important role they play in the life of our community. Hardly the sort of thing you would expect to see if we as a community were truly intent on showing our gratitude to these dedicated men and women who daily put their lives on the line on our behalf.

A COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

All of which begs the question – "Why is it that this group of dedicated professionals is all too often overlooked or undervalued – while other public sector professionals, such as hospital staff, police and firefighters, often receive much greater recognition?"

That's a tough one to answer – given the tens of thousands of people in our community who every year owe their lives to the skill and commitment of those paramedics who respond to their calls for assistance in their time of greatest need.

Probably part of the reason stems from a certain lack of knowledge in our community as to just how hard it is to become a paramedic, the demanding education and training that goes into their formation, and the many challenges and difficulties they face once they are finally on the job – which in some cases can actually cost them their lives.

EDUCATION FOR EXCELLENCE

One good place to start in correcting this is by having a look at the extensive education and training paramedics must receive before they can qualify for this work.

Just for the record, becoming a paramedic is not an easy task, given the stringent educational requirements that must be met before you can get even close to manning an emergency vehicle and answering distress calls. Currently, primary care paramedics (the basic qualification) must successfully complete a two-year college course that involves both classroom instruction and on-the-job training. And the educational demands for advanced care and critical care paramedics are even greater.



For those entering the profession, this two-year college course is just the first step – but it’s a demanding one. For this course is packed – not all that surprising when you consider that it is designed to introduce prospective paramedics to virtually every area of medicine. To do this, it uses classroom instruction combined with real life experience acquired in hospitals and in the field, which sees students work with paramedic crews. Key areas in this two-year course include biology, psychology, pharmacology, and approaches to dealing with medical emergencies as well as communications, physical education and emergency vehicle operation. In addition to having to successfully master the course requirements, students are evaluated on their personal and leadership skills and their level of empathy and compassion. And students are expected to complete 500 hours of in-hospital and in-ambulance hands-on experience under the guidance of hospital and paramedic staff.

Clearly, this course is not for the faint of heart.

And for those wishing to become advanced care paramedics, the requirements are even greater – involving an additional year of education and training, which, when completed, allows graduates to perform a wider range of emergency procedures and administer a number of medications not allowed by primary care paramedics.

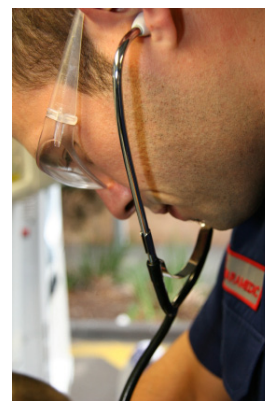
Finally, for those brave souls seeking to become critical care paramedics, the education and training required are even more stringent – involving training in all areas of life saving, which provides graduates with skills similar to those of physicians in a number of areas. Armed with this in-depth knowledge and a powerful skill set, critical care paramedics are able to treat many different life-threatening situations, using a wide array of medical devices and drugs. And their training allows them to differentiate between child and adult critical care situations.

A STELLAR RECORD OF ACHIEVEMENT

Based on the experience to date, Ottawa's paramedics are putting their skills and education to very good use – as seen by the large number of awards and citations received in just the last couple of years.

These include:

- Four paramedics, who received the N.H. McNally award for their bravery in treating Constable Eric Czapnik, killed while on duty – an award bestowed on paramedics whose lives were at risk. These brave individuals faced a particularly dangerous situation where they were required to assist Constable Czapnik while at the same time restraining his attacker until other constables arrived.
- Ottawa Paramedics, Robert Wilson and Jill deBoer, who received the MedicAlert "Legends of the Call Award" for their outstanding work in responding to health crises.
- Paramedic dispatchers, Nadine Leduc and Tara Josey, who received the Governor General's Medal for Bravery and the City of Ottawa's Award for Heroism for helping the victim of a shooting at a Tim Horton's coffee shop while bullets were flying. The women were both off-duty at the time.
- And finally the five Ottawa paramedics who received provincial bravery awards and Governor General's Exemplary Service Medals at this year's Association of Emergency Medical Services Conference.



These are just a few of the awards received by Ottawa paramedics in recent years – and just a few of the many difficult situations in which they often find themselves as they seek to perform their responsibilities above and beyond the call of duty. For that's what they do every day of the year as they address a wide range of emergencies – ranging from helping people in the midst of life-threatening health crises, to aiding the victims of serious traffic or industrial accidents, to delivering babies by the side of the road.

Whatever the need, Ottawa paramedics are there – on the job, saving lives, and caring for the sick, the injured, and the vulnerable.

OTTAWA'S PARAMEDICS BY THE NUMBERS

A quick look at the statistics suggest Ottawa's paramedics are very busy people indeed – as seen by the fact that in 2010, there were 420 front line paramedics who were responsible for dispatching units across 10,000 square kilometers of Eastern Ontario, including Cornwall and Hawkesbury. During the peak period of the day, there were more than 40 ambulances as well as 15 response units deployed on the road answering a variety of calls.

That's a big job. And to do it right, paramedics must be constantly on the go – often with little time left over even to get a bite to eat. This never-ending call on their time and talents and the chronic understaffing which the City is trying to address is clearly taking its toll – as underlined in numerous media reports expressing alarm at the frequency of the situation where no paramedics are available for new calls.

Much of this is due to the sheer volume of calls. In 2010, paramedics responded to 114,542 calls – of which 80,975 were code 4's (that is, life-threatening situations). This was up about 3% from 2009. This dramatic increase in volume was noted in the most recent EMS annual report which stated, "Since 2001, the Paramedic Service has experienced consistent, year-over-year increases in call demand and responses. Response volume has increased 53.6% from 2001 to 2009 and has significantly exceeded the assumption of the original system design of a projected annual increase of 2%." Judging from the 8% increase seen in 2009, such increases in demand are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

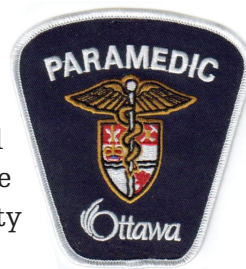
Clearly, these are busy times for Ottawa's paramedics. This is underlined by the fact that according to the Service's annual report, the average paramedic answered 280 calls in 2009 and 278 in 2010 – which eclipses the call rate of Ottawa's 871 professional firefighters who, if you exclude false alarms, answered 17,755 calls for service in 2009 and 17,347 calls in 2010, which translates to just 20 calls per firefighter per year.

All of which suggests that the City of Ottawa is getting a very good return indeed on its investment in its paramedics.

OTTAWA'S PARAMEDICS – A COMMITMENT TO SERVICE

But as important as these numbers are in pointing out the efficiency of Ottawa's paramedics and the bargain they represent, this is ultimately not about money. It's about honoring the skill and professionalism of these highly skilled individuals. And it's about valuing their commitment to saving lives and reducing suffering in our community.

For whether they're giving first aid to gravely injured victims of a head-on collision, helping deliver the baby of a distraught first-time mother, far away from home and the nearest hospital, resuscitating a patient suffering a massive heart attack, or trying to save the life of a wounded police constable while restraining his attacker, Ottawa's paramedics are there – doing their duty, risking their lives, and serving the community they love, 24/7, every day and every night of the year!



We owe them a lot – and the least we can do is give them the respect and recognition they deserve.



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