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## **Frontline Stress behind the Scenes: Emergency Medical Dispatchers**

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# Abstract

## Introduction

Critical incident stress (CIS) among emergency medical services (EMS) personnel is receiving increasing research attention, with a predominant focus on paramedics. In contrast, the experiences of emergency medical dispatchers (EMDs) have been virtually ignored.

## Objective

To identify the types of stressors that are unique to EMDs, as part of a larger study on EMS personnel.

## Method

Medical dispatchers, recruited during a mandatory continuing education program in a large urban EMS organization, were offered a choice of individual or group interview. One group (n = 3) and 5 individual interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews focused on descriptions of typical stressors and recommendations for improving recovery. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, along with field notes. Coding trees were developed and themes categorized to reflect broad and more specific themes, using the constant comparative method. This entails a systematic, iterative examination and categorization of the text. Transcripts were coded independently by two researchers and compared regularly to ensure inter-rater reliability.

## Results

Preliminary analysis suggests that although both paramedics and EMDs share many of the same stressors, EMD's experiences are distinguishable across the following domains: call overload, decisions about priority status, and language barriers hamper decision making and increase stress; insufficient call center staff and a shortage of ambulances for numbers of calls; inadequate environmental conditions of the call center (e.g., too cold or hot, ergonomic equipment not replaced often enough); the absence of available quiet space; no paid stress leave (unlike for paramedics); adversarial relationship between EMDs and paramedics; having one's hands tied and being reprimanded for sending too much help contributes to escalating powerlessness and stress; managers make crucial decisions without understanding EMD job; and control center personnel are more guarded/secretive as a result of experiencing verbal abuse and ridicule for seeking support/help thereby minimizing the possibility for accessing support from peers. Notably, the EMDs in this study emphasized the greater magnitude of cumulative stress in performing the dispatch role, pointing to their prior paramedic experiences as a comparison.

## Conclusions

This study reveals the differential stressors experienced by EMDs and underscores the importance of workplace climate for both contributing to and mitigating the effects of CIS and cumulative stress. EMS organizations may be able to facilitate employee recovery by introducing simple administrative policies, such as providing: designated quiet rooms; explicit guidelines for handling difficult calls; feedback about outcomes of (particularly difficult) calls to improve response to future calls; positive feedback from supervisors; consistent rotating shifts; and regular mandatory educational programs.

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