Should Paramedics Obtain Degrees?

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The first class of certified paramedics entered the field in the 1970s (Edgerly, 2013), requiring no college prerequisites. Although there are pockets of paramedic programs requiring science or general education courses, only a few states, like Kansas and Oregon, require new paramedics to have a college degree as a prerequisite for licensure (Caffrey et al., 2018). As a result, there is a debate about whether the current standards are enough or if emergency services workers would better serve patients if educated more traditionally. While some argue obtaining a college degree would significantly improve paramedics' skills, pay, and reputation in the medical community, others are resistant to change that may cause further shortages in the field. However, it is paramount that

Some emergency medical leaders have a hard time grasping how the industry could benefit from degreed professionals. According to the National Association for Emergency Medical Technicians President Matt Zavadsky, paramedic education might vary across the U.S., but most states require 1,200 to 1,700 hours of training (Oberliesen, 2019). While he concedes that a degree could lead to higher pay, he argues the training and certification process has remained the same since the 1970s. Furthermore, he denies the system is broken since "there's never been any research to suggest whether a paramedic with a degree has better patient outcomes compared to a paramedic without a degree" (Oberliesen, 2019). Gary Ludwig (2018), a fire chief in Champaign, Illinois, worries fewer potential EMS workers will make an effort under new requirements. This is not only due to the time it takes to complete a degree—time where certified candidates could already be receiving on-the-job training—but the monetary cost. The National Center for Education Statistics claims two-year schools cost $11,389 annually, and four-year institutions are $28,123 (The Institute of Education Sciences, 2021). However, the

median pay for paramedics is $36,650 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). For some experts, the costs outweigh the benefits. They are not convinced a college graduate can serve patients or perform a tracheotomy, for example, any better than a person with a certificate. Furthermore, they worry schooling for interested professionals could be thwarted by the ebbs and flows of the pandemic. The Emergency Medical Services Authority (EMSA) predicts a "nationwide shortage of 42,000 emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and paramedics by 2030, partially caused by paramedic schools putting things on hold during" COVID-19 (Rankin, 2021). It is so concerning that departments are pulling supervisors out of their offices and back into the field. Considering all the roadblocks, why should potential paramedics bother with additional schooling?

However, proponents of furthering paramedic education argue that degrees would help advance the careers of emergency workers and help them be taken more seriously in the medical community at large. According to the *Journal of Emergency Medical Services* (Schulz, 2016), "this may steer away a large portion of Ricky Rescues who blast out of EMT school in a few weeks, and we could see an industry-wide raise in pay and probably more respect from our other healthcare peers." Schulz (2016) also claims such degrees would allow paramedics to advocate for their own industry in scientific journals, give candidates "a competitive edge" when applying for jobs, and allow professionals to transfer to other medical fields. Those afraid obtaining a degree would be too much of a time commitment can also seek out programs that offer online courses for paramedics who have already been certified. For example, Beaufort County Community College in North Carolina gives certified professionals one year of credit toward an Associate in Applied Science (AAS) in Emergency Medical Science. The rest of the online schooling takes approximately two years to finish (Weston, 2020). Director of the program, Billy Repass, asserts that it not only illustrates career commitment but that "research has shown that

patient outcomes improve with high levels of education in first responders" (Weston, 2020). Propoents of change in the field want improvement in patient outcomes and strive for paramedics to be well-prepared, well-paid, and percieved as the vital part of the emergency response system they are. Still, some debate if a two or four-year degree is the only way to go.

Other professionals propose a compromise between the two schools of thought. Though they agree that college degrees should not be required, they believe all paramedic certification programs should be accredited (meaning it has undergone internal and external peer review). However, these vetted programs should teach both in the classroom and in the field—even if the fieldwork is virtual. This is because both types of training provide patients with a higher-caliber caretaker. For example, a study published in the *Journal of Allied Health* compared students who graduated from accredited and non-accredited paramedic initial education programs. These students also took the National EMS Certification between 2012 and 2014. The study involved 8,404 paramedic candidates and determined students from accredited programs performed nearly 10 percent higher on the exam and illustrated higher cognitive skills in clinical content such as ventilation, cardiology, obstetrics, and resuscitation (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Advocates of this approach claim paramedics who score higher on exams can only better benefit the interest of public health.

When it comes to paramedic education, experts in the field are divided. Leaders in the field, even those who have degrees themselves, do not see the benefit of requiring college in an industry that is already shorthanded. As far as they are concerned, no changes have been made since the 1970s because the system is not broken. They do not see how a degree translates to a field-ready first responder. Others believe education, whether that is the product of a degree or an accredited program, gives power back to paramedics, not only in education and pay, but when

it comes to providing them with a voice. That voice, they claim, will allow paramedics to express their perceptions rather than someone from the outside speaking for them. In addition, it will improve care for people whose lives are in the hands of those paramedics.

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