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Sources of support for paramedics managing work-related stress in a Canadian EMS service

Introduction. Paramedics are routinely exposed to work-related stress and may seek help from a variety of sources to mitigate the effects of stress on their health, family life, and ability to work safely and effectively. Greater clarity is needed in understanding how paramedics would seek help in anticipation of providing and funding needed resources in treating work related stress. The objective of this study was to determine how paramedics access different types of support in a Canadian EMS service.

Methods. Paramedics in a municipally-operated service in southwest Ontario (annual call volume 80,000) were invited to complete a 167 item online questionnaire. Participants were asked to report likelihood of seeking help from a supervisor, a partner or other co-worker, a union representative, a base hospital educator, family, or a therapist. Participants were also asked about levels of occupational and organizational work-related stress. Repeated measures ANOVA and ANOVA strategies were utilized to analyze the data.

Results. 145 paramedics (a 54% response rate) completed the questionnaire. Respondents were more likely ($p < 0.001$) to seek support from family or a paramedic work partner than from any other source. Respondents were less likely to seek support from (sequentially) a co-worker, a therapist, a union representative, a supervisor, or a base hospital educator. As access to employee assistance services for respondents is administered by the supervisory structure, stress levels were analyzed for individuals that were more or less likely to seek support from their supervisor. Analysis revealed higher levels of organizational ($p < 0.001$) and operational ($p < 0.05$) workplace stress in those individuals who were unlikely to seek support from their supervisor.

Conclusion. These findings indicate that investments in awareness and education on accessing help for paramedics suffering from work related stress should be spent on peer programs, and open houses with family and friends rather than sending supervisors for extra training in stress identification. Thought should be given to create confidential access to employee assistance programs for work related stress issues to promote easier non-threatening access. Further work with paramedics needs to be done to remove the cultural stigma involved in coming forward to seek assistance.