EMS Case Study #4  Dealing with Death

Instructions

This EMS Case Study deals with the dead or dying patient. As emergency health care professionals confronting death is an area of our duties that many of us fell unprepared for. This case study will vary from our regular format as it is designed as a discussion session. Review of your organizations protocols and operations plans is strongly recommended. This discussion should last approximately one hour.

This case study will be divided into the following sections:

I. The dead patient.
II. Patient's family.
III. The EMS responder.

The Dead Patient

As professional rescuers our most common experience with death and dying is usually found in the setting of a geriatric patient who has died at home or extended care facility. Though these calls can be difficult in most cases they are routine. Second we often find ourselves dealing with an unexpected death such as a traumatic death (MVC, suicide, homicide). These calls often present us with a “shock” value that many times lasts our entire careers. Also included in this second group are the sudden cardiac arrest scenarios. As the national trend of no longer transporting unsuccessful resuscitations, many of us find ourselves faced with “calling a code” while still at the patient home or place of work.

Some common rules of thumb to keep in mind when dealing with a dead patient.

1. If in doubt, transport.
2. Keep in mind a possible crime scene, treat it as one.
3. Maintain the patient’s dignity.
4. Guard your conduct, BE A PROFESSIONAL!!

The Patient’s Family

In dealing with the surviving family use a simple rule, “Let your yes be yes and your no be no.” This translate to ‘tell them the truth’. State that the patient is dead. Do not use phrases such as “He has gone to a better place” or “She is an angel now”. Not only may you offend someone but in their state of emotional upset they (the family) may not fully understand what you are trying to say.

If it is not a crime scene, allow the family to see the patient. If you have never experienced a family death this provides a sense of closure to the family. Be supportive of the family. However do not patronize or belittle the family. Be a professional.
The EMS Provider

Do not forget yourself. Dealing with deaths affects us all. If your department has an employee assistance program they can be a valuable resource for you and your crew. As a supervisor give your crews time to talk and debrief the situation. If needed rotate them out of service for a shift. Paying a few hours overtime now can make up for a lot of missed time later.

Dealing with death and dying is an unpleasant part of our industry. However by preparing yourself and your staff, making arrangements ahead of time and a little bit of common sense can go a long ways.