

# ...Paramedics train hundreds of hours to make decisions in seconds

By Shaun Koh

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On the job, a paramedic deals in seconds that can mean the difference between life and death.

But more than 600 hours of classroom and practical training lead up to those crucial few seconds.

Mike Drennon, operations officer for Lexington County Emergency Medical Services, said there are many hours of training and tests before one can become a paramedic.

**"LET'S SUPPOSE** a person coming out of high school likes the adventure and finds being a paramedic meaningful work. His first step is to sign up for the 96-hour course which is held for 15 to 20 weeks," said Drennon, a certified paramedic.

Interested people must be at least 16 years old.

"The course teaches basic emergency medical care such as how to handle people with broken bones and so forth," he said.

At the end of this course, students who maintain a 70 average, on a 100-point scale, must take the state examination in order to continue the training and become a certified paramedic in the state. The examination is administered by the state Department of Health and Environmental Control.

**DRENNON SAID** there are two phases in the examination, a practical section, in which the trainees

must show they can properly do any number of the 34 required skills, and a 150-question written test.

He said applicants in Lexington County are reviewed by a board of six people, consisting of senior paramedics and supervisors.

"The next step is to go into the training program, which lasts a month and consists of 30 hours of practical work."

He said the trainees then become emergency medical technicians and are assigned to senior paramedics, who are in charge of the trainee's on-the-job training.

**"THE TRAINEE LEARNS** from each crew member and rides with them. As such, every member of the service is involved in the training. But if something goes wrong in the training, then the senior paramedic is held responsible," Drennon said.

After a year of on-the-job training, Drennon said, the trainees are given an aptitude test and a psychological screening before they are allowed to take the paramedic course.

An aptitude test is a written examination to test the trainee's capability to do the job.

"To take the course, one has to be recommended by the service. The course is 500 hours of practical training, and it is administered through a hospital by

Emergency Medical Services of the Midlands. It is taught by doctors and lasts seven months with written and practical examinations."

**HE SAID PARAMEDICS** learn pharmacology, how to administer intravenous fluids and how to change the rate of heart beats.

When one becomes a certified paramedic, he or she is still kept busy with review sessions.

"We don't try to make experts out of EMTs. They learn basic care. But we do try to make experts out of our paramedics who must be able to handle every imaginable situation," he said.

Lexington County is a rural county, Drennon said. So members are constantly rotated from one section of the county to another. Lexington employs about 31 paramedics.

"The problem in rural counties is that one place may be busy, and another part of the county is not. So in order that everyone keeps in touch with what they were trained to do, they are rotated between busy areas to less busy areas."

Each paramedic has an EMT for a partner. And the pairings are rotated every two weeks, he said.

The salary for a paramedic in Lexington County ranges from about \$15,000 to \$21,000, Drennon said.

Edited by Lesia Shannon