



TRIPLE ZERO HEROES

THESE MEN AND WOMEN ARE THERE FOR US FOR SOME OF OUR SCARIEST MOMENTS. ONE PARAMEDIC TAKES US THROUGH THE SKILL AND DRAMA OF HIS LIFE-SAVING ROLE.

Words Carmel Sparke

From broken bones on a rugby field to heart attacks and car crashes, paramedics witness accident and injury every day. Each shift is different, but there's one common theme to virtually every callout.

"Everyone's happy to see a paramedic. We're always popular and it's a good feeling to have," says NSW Ambulance paramedic Evan Steinle-Davies, 28.

"It's great just to be able to put a smile on your patient's face and to relieve their pain or to provide a bit of reassurance. It's so fulfilling."

He's one of the country's estimated 17,000 paramedics. After four years with NSW Ambulance, Steinle-Davies can't imagine doing anything else, having experienced the highs, the lows and the unpredictability of the job.

SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

Working at a large Sydney ambulance station, Steinle-Davies covers the city and northern suburbs in 12-hour shifts with two half-hour 'crib' breaks, which are a chance to get some food or sleep. Night shifts are part of the job.

"People think the night shift is cruisy, but on average we attend anywhere from six to 12 jobs overnight," he says.

"And you can never tell when it's going to be busy – it might be a Monday or a Tuesday night, you'll be up for 12 hours, and wonder, 'What happened to my crib?'"

When they're called to a job, paramedics just receive brief information on a screen in the ambulance and the full picture is only revealed when they arrive.

One paramedic is the designated driver, and the other takes responsibility for treating patients; they swap the roles on the next shift. Drivers take the lead role in getting to the patient quickly, operating the radio and coordinating other services, while the paramedic on treating duty is mainly focused on patients.

They both look after the patient once on the scene, but divide up these primary responsibilities each shift as the most efficient way of providing care.

Once the patient has been assessed and treated, if they need to go to hospital, one paramedic rides with the patient, and the other drives. At the hospital, paramedics wait for the patient to be triaged (prioritised for care), then it's back to the station, ready for the next callout.

These range from life-threatening situations to the calls that could have been fixed with a trip to the GP.

"Every hour is different, and I love that. You can go to a kid with croup, then an hour later, you're dealing with a rugby accident, and the next minute you're at a cardiac arrest," he says.

In one case, Steinle-Davies recalls attending a 23-year-old man at home, who was nursing his foot,

reporting he'd "hit his big toe against the wall accidentally".

"When we do get to take a look, it's just a bit bruised," he says. "It kind of gets on our nerves because if we're attending someone with a stubbed toe, then someone else who is out there having a heart attack or has been hit by a car in a proper emergency, we're an ambulance down. But we stay professional throughout and treat all injuries with the utmost respect."

HEARTBREAKING TIMES

While they nearly always appear calm on the outside, on the inside it can be a different story, as challenging, stressful scenarios unfold.

"Once on the scene, your brain is constantly thinking, 'what am I going to do next?' especially if it's a big job," says Steinle-Davies.

"If you have a critically injured person, or you have someone having a heart attack in front of you, you'd be thinking, 'What drug am I going to give? Have I spoken to the hospital? What am I going to do next?'"

"But you have to stay calm, because if people look at us and we're not calm, it would be a bit frightening for them."

He's felt occasionally threatened and in danger, but paramedics call police if the situation feels unsafe and won't go into a building if they believe a patient may be violent.

He finds domestic violence cases challenging, but the most distressing callouts are those involving young children, especially if they're seriously ill.

"No-one wants to see a loved one pass away and unfortunately with the job we have to deal with unexpected deaths, including kids.

"I've been on a job where a three-year-old has had a cardiac arrest and that's heartbreaking."

Paramedics are trained in dealing with trauma and Steinle-Davies says talking to colleagues helps a lot, with lessons learned from difficult callouts, and professional support and counselling is available if needed.

"It's part of the job – not everything can be glorious and clean. We do see a side of the world that a lot of people are sheltered from."

"However, every few weeks we have a breakfast BBQ at the station, which is great for a catch-up and staff morale."

"It can be stressful, and our shifts are long, but we get our days off and in the end it's a very rewarding job." 🍷

fast fact

NSW
ambulances
made
3,074
responses
a day in
2016–17,
on average.
That's one
response every
28 seconds.

Source:
NSW Ambulance

Did you know ambulance callouts aren't covered by Medicare? Find out more at hcf.com.au/ambulancecost