Paramedics: Power, Ethics and Responsibilities

Back in 1970s, many a young person glued themselves to the television set on Saturday nights to watch two young paramedics – handsome bachelor John Gage and family man Roy DeSoto – take to the streets of Los Angeles in Squad 51, saving as many lives as an hour of TV would allow. The show was called *Emergency*, and it left many of those young viewers dreaming of being paramedics themselves. Though the Hollywood version of the profession made it look like a glamorous life of wild callouts during which they never lost a patient, the reality is that being a paramedic is back-breaking, hard work that does not always have a happy ending. Still, paramedics have come to represent the frontline of the medical field, and their service to the public is indispensable. Upon analysis of the profession, it becomes clear that paramedics have enormous professional power, according to the work of John French and Bertram Raven, which must be used ethically and responsibly in order to serve the public with integrity and honor.

As a paramedic, or EMT, a person would have access to and use all of French and Raven’s six bases of power as a part of the job. To begin with, being a paramedic comes with legitimate power, which is based on the job title alone (Stockstill). Although the title of “paramedic” may not be the most powerful job title there is, many people grow up idolizing rescue workers, such as police, fire fighters and paramedics, and learning to respect them. Therefore, for many people, the title of “paramedic” at least commands respect all by itself. Paramedic Amber Jones asserts that because of that respect, “the patient that needs a paramedic
opens their home to you for you to treat them, and [they] trust that you have no hidden agenda.”

Paramedics also have and use **reward** power, which is based on the ability, or perceived ability, to grant rewards or positive outcomes for compliance (Stockstill). In other words, patients will be likely to trust the paramedic and do what he or she asks simply because they know that it increases their chances of getting well or surviving an accident. On the opposite side of reward power is **coercive** power, which a paramedic must also use at times. When a professional uses coercive power, “people comply with…the professional’s demands in order to avoid punishment” or negative consequences (Stockstill). For instance, paramedic Scott Thomas cites cases where patients are “mentally altered due to drug or alcohol abuse” as times when he must use a more forceful approach to get them to consent to treatment, which is a form of coercive power. Possibly the most important power base that automatically comes with being a paramedic is **expert** power, which is based on a professional’s superior knowledge in their field (Stockstill). When people are so sick or severely injured that they require emergency medical attention, they are at their most vulnerable and must trust the paramedic to know exactly what to do to help them in that moment. Thomas said that being “well informed in your scope of practice” is one of the most important responsibilities a paramedic has to his or her patients, an idea that Jones echoes. She states that expert knowledge is key because “at times, the decision you make could be a life or death decision for [the patient]” (Jones). Closely related to expert power is **informational** power, something a professional can choose whether or not to use. When using informational power, a professional chooses to share their expert knowledge by explaining their advice or request in such a way that the other person understands the reasons behind it (Stockstill). Jones states that one of the greatest influences a paramedic can have on the public is through education. By sharing their expert knowledge at community events, paramedics use
informational power in “teaching the people how to live healthy and maybe avoid needing a paramedic” (Jones). Lastly, but quite importantly, a paramedic needs to use referent power to foster trust with their patients. According to French and Raven, referent power stems from a professional’s personality. The idea behind referent power is that people will more easily trust and comply with a professional they actually like (Stockstill). People who need emergency care are usually frightened and in pain; therefore, it can be extremely important for a paramedic to use referent power in those situations to calm the patient and gain their trust. Thomas mentioned that working with children is one of those times that call for a paramedic to use their own personality to gain trust, saying that some children “have no trust in you, which you have to build quickly in order to treat their emergency.” In this case, referent power, insignificant as it might seem at first, could be the difference between life and death. With this much professional power, a paramedic must know how to use it appropriately and how to focus on his or her professional responsibilities.

When a professional has access to great power, as paramedics do, there must be rules and guidelines to regulate the use of that power. For the purposes of governing all professionals who work in the emergency medical services profession, the National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians published a code of ethics and a professional oath in 1978 that all paramedics and EMTs follow in their professional practice. Written by Charles B. Gillespie, M.D., the code of ethics is a pledge, featuring twelve bullet points that each addresses an ethical component of the job. First and foremost, the code of ethics states that all members of this profession should strive to provide excellent care, “to conserve life” and “alleviate suffering” (Gillespie), a mandate not unlike the Hippocratic Oath taken by doctors. In addition, the code of ethics demands that paramedics and EMTs deliver care without bias, judgment or prejudice of
any kind (Gillespie). Although the code of ethics does not specifically reference the idea of
expert power, two of the points seem to specifically address the idea of using expert power
appropriately. The first of the two advises EMTs and paramedics “to not use professional
knowledge and skills in any enterprise detrimental to the public well being” (Gillespie). To do
otherwise would be a blatant abuse of expert power. In a separate point, EMTs and paramedics
are advised “to maintain professional competence” (Gillespie), which speaks to the importance
of expert power in this field. In an acknowledgement of the power of social media in today’s
world, the pledge also includes an admonishment “to use social media in a responsible and
professional manner that does not discredit, dishonor or embarrass” any stakeholder in the
emergency medical field, especially the patients (Gillespie). The last bullet point in the code of
ethics makes it clear that, not only are these professionals responsible for their own ethical
decisions, they are also bound to report others for incompetence and ethical violations as part of
their pledge (Gillespie.) Other bullet points address confidentiality, professionalism and
cooperation. The EMT Oath, also written by Dr. Gillespie, reiterates many of the tenets found in
the code of ethics; however, it introduces new ideas, as well. The EMT or paramedic who takes
this oath swears to enter the homes of strangers “for the benefit of only the sick and injured,
ever revealing” what is seen or heard there, except as it becomes legally necessary (Gillespie).
Just as the code of ethics addresses expert power without naming it, the oath discusses
informational power, in that paramedics pledge to “share…medical knowledge with those who
may benefit from what [they] have learned (Gillespie). With firm guidelines in place to direct
their professional practices, paramedics can focus on their professional responsibilities to
patients and the public.
In addition to the obvious responsibility to minister to patients’ emergency medical needs, paramedics have several important responsibilities to their patients on the scene and after. First and foremost, paramedic Scott Thomas asserts that a paramedic must “be an advocate for their [patient’s] medical needs, which may include getting help for abuse victims, whether they be adults or children, and getting them help with prescriptions or medical devices.” Paramedic Amber Jones states that there several ways a paramedic can meet the responsibility of reporting suspected abuse, including contacting law enforcement directly or alerting the emergency room doctors and nurses, but whatever route is taken, the paramedic must have “ample and correct documentation” before making the report. Jones also states that a paramedic is responsible for making sure their “personal beliefs or opinions…have absolutely no bearing on how [they] treat the patient,” an idea with which Thomas agrees. He says the rule is “to treat everyone like you would your own grandmother” (Thomas). Another responsibility a paramedic has to his or her patients is to maintain privacy and confidentiality, and this is one area where paramedics stray into violations of professional ethics and conduct, but certainly not the only one (Jones).

Unfortunately, paramedics, like all professionals, occasionally make mistakes, neglect their responsibilities and end up abusing the power of their profession.

While the vast majority of paramedics operate within the boundaries of professional ethics and use their professional power appropriately, from time to time mistakes happen and those boundaries are crossed, resulting in a violation of ethics and misuse of power. The most common mistake that paramedics make, according to Amber Jones, involves patient privacy and confidentiality, which is not only a violation of professional ethics, but also a violation of the patient’s rights under HIPPA, which is “the healthcare privacy act.” She states that “while everyone talks about different situations they have run across, there should never be a discussion
of who you took care of” (Jones). Even though it typically just happens between friends, Jones asserts than even then “it is still unethical and shouldn’t be done” and that “the patient should be able to trust their protected healthcare information will stay protected” (Jones). Both Jones and Thomas cite off duty behavior as a part of professional conduct that can be violated. According to Jones, “most people in the community look up to you,” which means that they are always watching. Thomas provides a specific example of the way that off duty behavior can affect professional situations. He states that “even off duty, someone may recognize you as you yell at them for going too slow or turning in front of you [and] tomorrow you may have to see that person as a patient,” which would make for an awkward situation in an already emotionally charged moment (Thomas). However, paramedic mistakes are not limited to the examples above and can be far worse. Canadian paramedic James Duncan Keats was fired from his job in December 2014 after allegations of sexual assault on the job (Thompson). According to an article in *The Hants Journal*, a newspaper in Nova Scotia, Keats is currently on trial for “allegations that he sexually assaulted a 71-year-old…woman on two separate occasions when she was a patient in his care” (Thompson). Though Keats has pleaded not guilty to all charges, Stacey Brown, a spokeswoman for Emergency Health Services, the company for which Keats worked, stated that “the court proceedings produced new details of his conduct that violate our EHS Ethical Code of Conduct,” which led to his termination (qtd. in Thompson). In this case the consequences for the professional are quite clear. Not only has he lost his job and most likely his license to practice emergency medicine, his reputation in the community has been ripped to shreds. If convicted, he will most likely lose his freedom, as well. The consequences for the victim, though not specifically stated in the article by the victim or any representative, can be inferred as feelings of violation, insecurity and betrayal, as she was allegedly harmed by one she
trusted to help her in time of need. Depending on her own resilience, this situation could have a profound and lasting impact on the quality of her life, as she works to heal from the emotional scarring. As is true of any professional, a paramedic has untold power to help or to hurt, and it is only his or her personal choices that dictate which it will be.

At the conclusion of this project, I can truly say I have learned a wealth of information about being a paramedic, information that has allowed me to see behind the flashing lights and blaring sirens to what it truly means to be in service to the public this way. In summary, analyzing the profession with French and Raven as my guides gave me great insight into just how powerful and influential a paramedic can be. A paramedic does not have to have a medical degree in order to wield tremendous professional power during patients’ most challenging moments. My look into the code of ethics showed me the heavy burden paramedics bear in doing their job. Specifically, I learned about the legal responsibilities a paramedic has in reporting suspected abuse. It must take amazing focus and observation skills for a paramedic to notice details in the environment while also giving the patient his or her full attention. As to being a responsible, ethical member of this profession, it would take great self-control to avoid the pitfalls and mistakes that lead to violation of professional ethics. I can only imagine the odd, surprising, even comical things a paramedic must see in the course of a shift, and the temptation to post on Facebook about it must take some time to overcome. This would be my greatest challenge. Otherwise I absolutely have what it takes to be a responsible, ethical paramedic, by removing my personal opinions from my professional practice, showing great compassion for all patients who come into my care and being an advocate for them and for their medical needs. I would manage my professional power responsibly, understanding at all times that it is a gift that
comes with my profession and that my profession is a well-respected one that deserves my respect, as well.
Works Cited


Jones, Amber. Personal Interview. 21 January 2015.


Thomas, Scott. Personal interview. 21 January 2015.