

LEMSA, college roll out new class for ambulance crews

EMT class extends clinical, practical study

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A new EMT curriculum offered in Lancaster puts the brains back into emergency medicine.

Over the years, when executive director C. Robert May interviewed potential employees for Lancaster Emergency Medical Services Association, he found they couldn't make the grade.

"I would say two-thirds of those we interviewed failed the basic competency," May said.

Even though emergency medical technicians and paramedics must pass a course and state exams to work in the field, LEMSAs officials found their own screening process weeded out most potential employees.

"Over the last several years, we've noticed a steady decline in employable people," said LEMSAs operations manager Dave Nitsch, who also is an EMT instructor. "(EMT courses) tend to only train people how to pass the (certification) test. They're shifting away from educating people and toward training people."

A year ago, LEMSAs made a call to Lancaster General College of Nursing & Health Sciences to see if there was interest in creating a beefed-up EMT curriculum. Just a few months later, details were being worked out. On Jan. 9, the first EMT courses start at the college. The process flowed because the college is in the business of teaching health care and LEMSAs is in the business of saving lives.

"It's a dovetailing of philosophies," May said of the collaboration. "It meets our needs, and it meets their needs."

This isn't the stuff most EMT courses offer, though. The 244 class hours are double those of most EMT courses. And at \$450 for the basic course, it's nearly double the cost of most EMT classes. But students at this EMT program will come out with more than certification.

"With current EMT programs, students aren't coming out with critical-thinking skills," said Christina Baumer, chair of continuing education at the college. "They're not trained to know what to do if the first thing they try doesn't work."

Most certification programs don't include clinical time with sick people or time riding with ambulance crews, so often the first time graduates encounter a sick person is their first day on the job. Some students find by the time they actually get their first job and see what it's all about, the stressful field just isn't for them.

The new curriculum for students at the college includes clinical time in Lancaster General Hospital's emergency department and practical experience riding along with LEMSAs crews.

"If you have clinical time built in, students actually get to see what the job really involves," Baumer said. "That's only fair to students and to the public, also. The public expects that person on an ambulance to be well trained and know what to do for them. Anything less is not really putting the patient first."

Students won't be dumped at the scene of an traffic accident, though. Students in the new EMT curriculum will be trained on high-tech dummies that sweat, bleed, speak, vomit and do just about anything

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else an ailing human does.

The human-patient simulators look like mannequins and react to medical treatment. They have heartbeats, their pupils dilate, their tongues swell, they react to drugs and fluids when students administer aid, and they even have a microphone so instructors can speak for the patient during interaction with students.

The college obtained grants and donations to buy the human-patient simulators long before the EMT course was even considered, but EMT students also will reap the benefit. It's a far cry from most EMT classes, in which students pretend to be ill while other students pretend to treat them.

"The human-patient simulators offer a nice buffer between healthy people in class playing as if they're sick and the real thing," Nitsch said.

If developers of this curriculum had any doubts about the interest in a harder, longer, costlier EMT course, the first round of student registration convinced them it might be just what the doctor ordered. More than 25 students are signed up for two upcoming classes — the evening class on Mondays and Thursdays from 6 to 10 p.m. and the morning class on Tuesdays and Fridays from 8 a.m. to noon.

"We had said if we could get five people in each class we'd be

happy," Baumer said. "This little fire just took off. Obviously, there's a need out there, and people are looking for a quality program because they just migrated to it."

For LEMSA's part, Nitsch and May are happy about the prospect of all those potential graduates, too. Not only are they aligned with the nursing school's reputation, graduates might decide to take advantage of their LEMSA affiliation by going to work there after graduation.

"We're doing this selfishly," Nitsch said. "We'll be getting a stream of better-trained students out of this."

Baumer said she expects the EMT continuing education course to evolve into an associate degree program at the college. LEMSA and the college also are adding a continuing education paramedic course in the fall semester, which begins in mid-August.

By then, May and Nitsch hope the public will better understand that the crew members are more than ambulance drivers — they are paid, trained, educated and certified to do what they do.

"We want to get away from the 'ambulance driver' concept that the public has," Nitsch said. "This course gets into the whys of treating people, not just the hows."

For more information about the EMT program or the fall paramedic course, call the college at 544-4912.
