



Paramedics unable to use life-saving training

By Ann LoLordo

When county fire fighters arrived on the scene of a car accident in Linthicum last fall, they found an unconscious woman with severe cuts and gashes on her face and neck. She had stopped breathing.

They tried to revive her, but the seriousness of her wounds complicated the task. The emergency medical technicians conferred with the nearest trauma center. A hospital physician advised a cricothyrotomy—to cut a hole in the neck, insert a tube into the trachea and administer oxygen.

The men knew how to do the procedure but could not do it under state law. They continued cardiopulmonary resuscitation, but the woman later died.

The cricothyrotomy would have opened an airway for the woman. The fire fighters learned the technique in an emergency medical technician-paramedic (EMT-P) training program, an advanced level of emergency care assistance.

The specialized training, however, is not recognized in Maryland. Legislation that would have done so, and established medical protocol for its use, was defeated in the 1982 General Assembly.

Roger Simonds, chief of the county Emergency Medical Services Division, thinks the EMT-paramedic should be recognized in Maryland because of incidents like the car accident. He can't say for sure that the cricothyrotomy would have saved the woman's life. But it might have, and that's the key, he said.

On October 7, 50 county fire fighters will graduate from Anne Arundel Community

College's EMT-paramedic program. Most of them will have taken a national certification exam five days before commencement.

Seven career fire fighters have already been certified as EMT-paramedics by the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technician-Paramedics, and Chief Simonds expects at least a dozen more will qualify after the October 2 exam.

Until state officials recognize the training, the fire fighters will be hamstrung in efforts to provide the most advanced emergency care available, Chief Simonds said.

He plans to ask one of the county's 18 state legislators to introduce a bill in the

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upcoming Maryland General Assembly session that would recognize the EMT-paramedic in Maryland.

Currently, fire fighters across the state who are known as paramedics are certified cardio-rescue technicians. Their skills include administering cardiopulmonary resuscitation, starting intravenous lines and monitoring heart rhythms.

The EMT-paramedic training addresses

a wide range of medical disciplines, including pediatrics, obstetrics and skeletal and muscular systems. It's a bank of knowledge that allows EMT-paramedics "to understand more of what they see and to do a better assessment of an emergency situation," Chief Simonds explained.

The cricothyrotomy is only one of several skills EMT-paramedics can perform that cardio-rescue technicians cannot. "The program prepares you to be a better provider all-around," Chief Simonds said.

Anne Arundel is not the only jurisdiction looking to incorporate EMT-paramedic training in its emergency medical care program. Baltimore and Montgomery counties are in the process of expanding their programs.

"To me the most important thing is for the counties to meet national standards," Chief Simonds said. "A standard has been established by the U.S. Department of Transportation as a level for delivery for care. I think it's important that we strive to meet those national standards."

The defeat of last year's bill has been attributed to a "misunderstanding" between the politicians, the professionals and the fire fighting community, said Chief Simonds.

There are others who claim the Maryland State Firemen's Association quashed it because Anne Arundel's program, which has been described as both tough and excessive, would establish the criteria for EMT-paramedic training programs in the state. The bulk of emergency medical care providers in Maryland, approximately 80 percent, come from the volunteer ranks.

Gordon C. Hatt, president of the Anne Arundel Professional Fire Fighters, believes the defeat of the bill was "a great disservice to the people of Anne Arundel county."

"The citizens of this county have spent a couple hundred thousand dollars to train people with skills that they can't now use. We're talking about people's lives. This is not some kind of game," Mr. Hatt said. "The bill would not have hurt the volunteers in any way."

Chief Simonds conceded the county has paid a "considerable amount of overtime" to replace fire fighters attending paramedic-training classes. The education costs were paid with federal and state funds.

Tom Tharpe, past president of the volunteer firemen's group, said the association couldn't back the bill because the medical community had not clearly defined what an EMT-paramedic was.

A "gentleman's agreement" on the issue was struck with the Maryland Institute of Emergency Medical Services System, the shock-trauma experts, which oversees training and certification of pre-hospital care providers, he said. Institute officials agreed not to push legislation until the criteria for an EMT-paramedic was set, Mr. Tharpe added.

The training in Anne Arundel county is based on the U.S. Department of Transportation criteria, which Mr. Tharpe said "is excessive in its demands."

The community college program requires 87 hours of study, while state officials contend that about 300 hours would be sufficient, Mr. Tharpe said.