OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SERVICES HAVE A RELEVANT ROLE IN PROTECTING THE HEALTH AND SAFETY OF PARAMEDICS

LES SERVICES DE SANTÉ AU TRAVAIL ONT COMPÉTENCE DANS LA SÉCURITÉ ET LA SANTÉ DES PERSONNELS NON MÉDICAUX

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SUMMARY. In this Letter to the Editor, the authors point out occupational health and safety risks for paramedics, and highlight the relevant role carried out by multidisciplinary occupational health services in the prevention of occupational risks and the promotion of physical and mental well-being of these workers.

Keywords: occupational health services, paramedics, occupational risks

RÉSUMÉ. *Dans cette lettre à l'éditeur, nous insistons sur les risques de sécurité et de santé encourrus par les personnels non médicaux ainsi que sur le rôle des services de santé au travail dans la prévention de ces risques et dans la promotion de leur santé physique et mentale.*

Mots-clés: *service de santé au travail, risque, personnel paramédical*

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The paper by Lošonczi and Haniš[1] is interesting, because the authors shed light on occupational safety risks for paramedics, such as aggression by patients, ambulance crash during emergency use, infection or intoxication, and the risk of injury or fall. However, these are only a few of the "occupational risks" that are present in this profession.

Paramedics, indeed, are exposed to many other occupational hazards for the employee's health. These include ergonomic issues due to patient handling, and psychosocial hazards such as work-related stress, which depends on organizational risk factors (e.g., night and shift work, working pace and workload etc.), emotional demands (witnessing human suffering, etc.) and workplace violence (risk of personal harm, physical attacks and verbal violence by patients and caregivers, terrorist incidents, etc.) that may even result in long-term health consequences like adjustment and post-traumatic stress disorders, or mental health disorders (e.g., burnout syndrome, anxiety, depression, etc.).[2] Furthermore, heat stress and natural UV radiation, which may affect this category of outdoor workers, are likely to be exacerbated by climate change within the next few years, with a higher risk of accidents and occupational diseases.[3]

Employers, researchers and policymakers should, therefore, take into account all occupational risks for paramedics, not only those for injuries in the workplace. The subsequent preventive measures should be global, according to the "Total Worker Health" vision, by including not only mandatory preventive measures, which are required by law and are the charge of employers on the basis of the risk assessment, but also workplace health promotion programs, which are voluntary and aimed at improving employee resilience and physical and mental well-being.[4]

A high level of psychological and physical health among paramedics, indeed, may benefit their quality of working life and job productivity, improve the quality of care, and reduce their burden of accidents and injuries.

Occupational health services, which are not mentioned in the work by Lošonczi and Haniš,[1] are a well-known preventive measure, needed for early recognition of high-risk situations for workers and medical fitness for work assessments, and are aimed at avoiding the onset of occupational injuries and diseases. Furthermore, occupational health surveillance (OHS) programs, carried out by occupational physicians, should be used to check the effectiveness of preventive measures, such as those cited by authors ("regular health and safety training, due caution, foresight, use of protective equipment, paramedic work wear and footwear"). OHS, indeed, should be implemented according to the "Deming Cycle" principles of quality improvement [Plan→ Do→ Study→ Act], within the framework of occupational risk management, to check the evidence-based effectiveness of certain ergonomic interventions and primary preventive measures.[5,6] This task is carried out by occupational physicians through anonymous and collective data, which are drawn from medical examinations of groups of workers who are qualitatively and quantitatively exposed to the same risk factors, and analyzed through the principles of occupational epidemiology.

Finally, the contribution of multidisciplinary occupational health services may be important for the early recognition of health disorders caused by new and emerging risk factors in the workplace, following the "One Health" approach.[7] As learned from the COVID-19 lesson, indeed, new challenges are posed by climate change to emergency personnel as first line responders, in terms of high psychological and biological burden.

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