

By Bryan E. Bledsoe, DO, FACEP, EMT-P



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Where are the Wise Men?

*"I may be old, in your eyes, but all my years have made me wise."
—"Old Admirals" by Al Stewart*

Last week, I took my computer to the repair shop after another famous Texas electrical storm rendered it pulseless and apneic. As I was signing it in, the repair guy looked up and asked, "Aren't you the guy who wrote my paramedic book?" After searching my memory, I remembered Mark—a paramedic with an excellent reputation, who worked in a nearby city. As we talked about the old days, he said, "You know, Bryan, I love EMS, but it is a young man's game. I couldn't make enough money to support my family and the work was killing me. So, I learned to repair computers, and here I am."

Just five days earlier, while buying a car at a nearby dealership, I met the young financial guy. As he looked at my paperwork, he said, "Are you the Bryan Bledsoe who wrote my paramedic book?" After several years in EMS, frustrated by poor pay and lack of upward mobility, he went back to college and earned a business degree. He said, "I loved EMS, but just could not afford to stay in the business." These encounters started me thinking. I, too, left EMS field work because of the poor pay and working conditions, despite the fact that I loved what I was doing. I was luckier than most: I had a degree, good grades and was able to go to medical school, which allowed me to stay involved in EMS in a different capacity. However, for most of my former coworkers, this was not an option. As I thought about the profession as a whole, one question came to mind: Where are the wise men?

It seems that EMS has plenty of people with experience and even plenty with knowledge. But, it has few people with wisdom. Wisdom results from knowledge, understanding and experience that can only be developed following years of education and prehospital practice. Many of the older paramedics were educated in an era when the curriculum was not as detailed as it is now. Many younger paramedics, although educated with the more extensive curriculum, never seem to stay in the field long enough to gain the necessary experience to make them wise.

Now don't get me wrong: There are many wise men and women in EMS. There are just not enough of them. Some people have stayed in the field and sought additional formal education. Baxter Larmon, Paul Maniscalco, Matt Streger and Gregg Margolis immediately come to mind, but there are others like Thom Dick, Mike Taigman, Mike Smith, Kate Dernocoeur and Bob Nixon, who have stayed in the field and changed things they felt could be improved. The customer service revolution in EMS came from within, not from outside the profession. Webster's defines a profession as "a vocation or occupation requiring advanced education and training, and involving intellectual skills." It defines a trade as "skilled work, distinguished from unskilled work or a profession or business." So is EMS a profession or a trade? I maintain it is a profession that still behaves like a trade.

For nearly 30 years, I have hoped EMS will change. While we already have one of the most sophisticated pre-

hospital systems in the world, we treat our EMS employees very poorly. My son, fresh out of high school, went to work several years ago at a home-improvement center nearby, starting at a higher hourly rate than many experienced paramedics are being paid. How can such a thing happen? I know. If you like what you do, you will tolerate poor pay and working conditions longer than somebody who does not like his work. Believe me, EMS administrators and government officials today know this. "Go ahead and quit," they may say, "there are 15 people waiting to take your job." While that may be true, nobody will stay in that position long. Thus, though the position is filled, experience and subsequent wisdom never develop. As we grow older and start a family, we start to look more at the future and less at the past and present. With maturity and family come responsibilities. A major responsibility is to provide an adequate income and benefits to support yourself and your family.

I am not sure what is going on here. At the very least, EMTs and paramedics should have complete parity with firefighters and police officers. There will always be parts of this country that cannot afford paid EMS personnel, and volunteer systems must exist. But, in these systems, the EMTs and paramedics are not dependent upon EMS for their livelihood. Over the last decade, we have seen several large multinational corporations buy up virtually all of the small ambulance businesses in the country. They over-leveraged themselves and counted on receiving a higher collection percentage than is humanly possible. This was followed by numerous operation closings and employee layoffs. Public utility model operations, while cost-saving, have done little, if anything, to improve the life of the street EMT or paramedic. System status management allows for increased vehicle use, but it does not allow employees much break time and virtually eliminates the camaraderie we used to see around ambulance stations. We have developed many schemes designed to keep EMS costs to a minimum. But, the cost savings always seem to come at the expense of the field provider.

So what is the solution? If we want quality EMS, we must be willing to pay for it. Although I'm a fiscal conservative, I feel that EMS should be funded to the same degree as fire and police operations. Until we provide better pay and better working conditions for all paramedics and EMTs, we will never have any significant longevity in EMS. And, until we have some longevity, we will never have the wise men (and women) that every profession needs. We need people who have experience, knowledge and understanding to be the visionaries required for the profession to evolve. EMS should not be guided by physicians, administrators, lawyers and such, but by its own. Where are the wise men? ■

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