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## Paramedics at risk of stress, anxiety and depression: Study

25. October 2010 22:36

By Dr Ananya Mandal, MD

According to the latest research paramedics are at a high risk of stress and depression. The Victorian study showed that around ten per cent of paramedics were found to have severe or extremely severe depression, while 40 per cent reported feeling the effects of stress. Nearly 25% were also found to suffer an "above normal degree of anxiety".

Researcher James Courtney explained that these workers were first responders at emergencies where they had to make rapid and life-saving decisions. Mr Courtney, a PhD candidate at Latrobe University in Melbourne said, "They're not just pushing buttons in a control room... These are the people you want to be in a good, fit state when they turn up to see us."

For the study he looked at almost 350 paramedics from Melbourne and surrounds, with around 250 of them men. He said that their shifts were "frequently extended by late jobs" although they typically worked a minimum 48 hour week starting with two ten-hour day shifts followed by two 14-hour night shifts. This takes a toll on their sleep with only 30 per cent of the paramedics rating themselves as "good sleepers". These paramedics were also found to have a "very high level of fatigue...over and above what was seen in other shift workers."

According to Mr Courtney, "Paramedics are paying the cost of rotating shift work... We do expect people to be working overnight in emergency services - we can't do too much about that - but the way those services are staffed needs to be reconsidered." Lack of sleep and fatigue also means that more prone to mistakes. Mr Courtney added, "Everything is a compromise in shift work...The trick is to minimise exposure, with employers recognising the need for healthier shift systems and shorter working hours, and for individuals to take on their responsibility as well, to ensure they sleep better."

Associate Professor Andrew Francis, of RMIT University, said occupational demands and shiftwork explained the findings for paramedics, even when compared to a group of nurses on night shift. "Paramedics are under high pressure all the time, they never know what they are going to encounter from one minute to the next, and they have to be ready to cope with just about anything...If they are sleeping poorly they are at higher risk of depression and anxiety as well as not being on the ball when they need to be making critical life and death decisions on the road," he said.

The study is published in The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Organization Psychology.

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The Metropolitan Ambulance Service (MAS) is taking up the matter. Spokesman Tony Walker says programs have been put in place to combat the problem. "We're working very closely with our staff and our unions to address fatigue and other issues which we know contribute to some of the psychological issues that have been identified in that paper," he said. The study follows an Auditor-General's report this month that found emergency incidents had increased by 50 per cent over the past decade, but staff levels were not keeping pace.

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