

PARAMEDICS IN PERIL

REDUCING ASSAULTS ON LONDON
AMBULANCE SERVICE CREWS



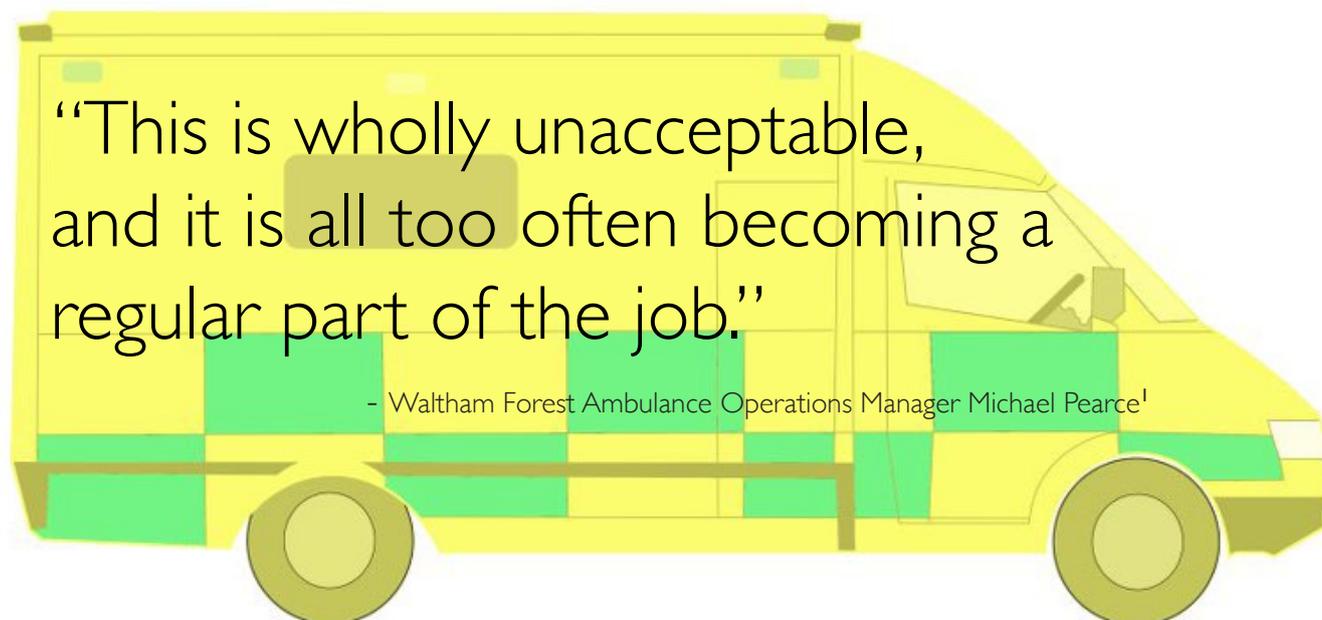
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INTRODUCTION

The London Ambulance Service (LAS) plays a massive role in the protection of Londoners. Responding to thousands of incidents a month, they are the frontline of healthcare for our city. However, through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests it has been found that abuse and assaults against the people manning this frontline service are increasing. More than three LAS frontline responders are abused or assaulted every day. Changes need to be made to lessen the toll this is taking on LAS crews and the financial burden this is placing on the service itself. This report will recommend a costed way to help reduce these unacceptable attacks against our frontline responders. Borrowing successful systems used by other emergency services could make the LAS the first ambulance service to trial body-worn cameras to deter these crimes.



WHOLLY UNACCEPTABLE RISK

It may seem hard to believe that an individual providing emergency medical help would become a target of abuse and violence, but more than three LAS frontline responders were abused or assaulted every day of 2013.

Abuse

Abuse of LAS crews seems to be a relatively common occurrence, with 749 reported instances of abuse in 2013. What is most shocking is that threats of violence have increased by 29% over the past three years.

The numbers of incidents of assault and abuse²

Calendar Year	Assault	Abuse	Total
2011	541	894	1435
2012	446	805	1251
2013	582	749	1331

1. http://www.londonambulance.nhs.uk/news/news_releases_and_statements/assault_sentence_welcomed.aspx

2. London Ambulance Service, Freedom of Information request data - March 2014

Assault

Even worse than LAS crews being verbally abused while trying to provide emergency medical treatment is an act of violence against these first responders. Assault has risen 23% in the past year with 582 reported incidents. Over the past three years it has become more dangerous to be on an LAS crew in terms of assault.

The top 5 most common themes recorded³

Category	2011	2012	2013	Total
Physical assault by a patient or third party (no weapons involved)	435	363	434	1232
Verbal Abuse (general)	219	250	309	778
Verbal Abuse (with threats)	190	255	268	713
Antisocial Behaviour (e.g. s5 POA)	237	131	92	460
Spat on by a patient or third party	49	41	46	136

CURRENT SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

The LAS puts a great deal of effort towards mitigating and avoiding abuse and assaults against its frontline workers. Using a mixture of preventative measures, informational campaigns, and harsh prosecutions, the LAS has made an effective start but their work could be strengthened by the recommendations set out in this report.

Dangerous Residences List

The LAS employs a system of marking problem residences in a private database that helps crews to prepare their responses for violent or abusive patients, which may include wearing a stab-proof vest or bringing police with them to the response.⁴ In 2013, the list - compiled using an information sharing scheme with the Metropolitan Police - included 390 residences across London. Of these 226 are classed as serious and require the need for police assistance.⁵

Information Campaigns

In the past the LAS, and the National Health Service (NHS) as a whole, have provided information campaigns to help prevent violence, such as their "No Excuse" campaign that reminded the public to treat first responders with respect, and that prosecutions for violence and abuse against first responders have increased.⁶

3. London Ambulance Service, Freedom of Information request data - March 2014

4. <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/features/screaming-blue-murder-we-join-a-london-ambulance-crew-for-the-busiest-nightshift-of-the-year-1850007.html> and <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2382076/London-ambulance-services-blacklisted-households-inhabitants-pose-danger-paramedics.html>

5. http://www.londonambulance.nhs.uk/news/news_releases_and_statements/ambulance_workers_assaulted_da.aspx?lang=en-gb

6. <http://www.prweek.com/article/109405/campaigns-public-awareness---no-excuse-ads-strive-cutassaults>

Prosecution as a deterrent

Prosecuting those who commit assaults against first responders is the NHS's major deterrent, and with co-operation with the Met, prosecutions are made easier. Punishments for assault have included community service, fines of several thousand pounds, probation, and even prison sentences.⁷ Of course this deterrent can be costly not only in terms of the time needed to properly report crimes, but also in the time it takes for these criminals to reach court.

A COST OF WELLBEING

With these levels of abuse and assault there are four major concerns principally regarding the health of LAS crews, but also the cost to the entire LAS.

Ambulance personnel physical wellbeing

Cases of severe assault can have life-changing results for LAS staff. One member of staff suffered permanent injuries when they lost the partial movement in one finger after being so savagely bitten by a drunken patient that surgery was required.⁸ Another member of staff, whose wrist was so severely sprained while restraining a violent patient, found that long after the incident they still had “twinges of pain every now and then”.⁹ These crimes which cause permanent physical injuries are being punished by harsh penalties, nevertheless better ways to prevent these incidents from recurring need to be explored.

The mental wellbeing of staff

The mental toll on the ambulance crews has been explored by the NHS and LAS. The average ambulance attendant in the UK takes 14.7 sick days a year, which is much higher than 2.8 days taken by doctors.¹⁰ Whilst this is only partly due to cases of assault it illustrates how difficult and physically demanding the job can be. Studies have shown that 34% of ambulance drivers in the UK have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the LAS have put precautions in place to reduce the occurrence in new recruits.¹¹

“When you’re going about your daily job treating patients you don’t expect to get attacked with a fence post – it was completely unprovoked. It affected me quite badly at the time and I questioned whether I wanted to continue working as a paramedic. It’s now at the back of my mind when I get called to similar incidents. At the end of the day, we’re here to help people and we don’t want to be in fear of being attacked.”

- Paramedic Leo Nakhimoff, 29, was assaulted in 2012 by a drunken patient¹⁰

7. http://www.londonambulance.nhs.uk/news/news_releases_and_statements/ilford_man_who_punched_ambulan.aspx?lang=en-gb and http://www.londonambulance.nhs.uk/news/news_archive/ambulance_service_welcomes.aspx

8. http://www.londonambulance.nhs.uk/news/news_archive/ambulance_service_welcomes.aspx

9. http://www.londonambulance.nhs.uk/news/news_releases_and_statements/assault_sentence_welcomed.aspx

10. <http://www.nhsemployers.org/HealthyWorkplaces/LatestNews/Pages/StaffSicknessFiguresReleased.aspx>

11. <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/iop/news/records/2008/11/November/PTSD-in-ambulance-workers.aspx>

12. http://www.londonambulance.nhs.uk/news/news_releases_and_statements/ambulance_workers_assaulted_da.aspx?lang=en-gb

A direct staffing toll to the LAS

There is a clear measurable effect on staffing following an assault. In one case a shoulder injury due to assault led to three weeks off the job for one crew member;¹³ in another eight weeks off for a severely sprained wrist.¹⁴ Through a LAS Freedom of information (FOI) request it was found that an estimated 633 working days are lost a year as a direct result of assaults, averaging 1.167 work days lost per assault. With that volume of days lost the LAS would need to have more than three extra frontline workers just to make up for the time lost every year.¹⁵ The severity of these assaults varies and this adds to the number of days needed to recover to a working state. After being attacked, 5.5% of LAS staff took more than 5 days off work, while another 1.6% took over 10 days. These figures do not even cover cases where members of staff are absent at later dates due to the cumulative effects of injury, so these numbers are most likely higher in actuality.

The suspected cost

The LAS have calculated that an average lost day of work for their staff costs £231.¹⁶ With 633 days lost to assault a year, this costs the LAS an estimated £125,700.¹⁷ Over the past three-year period an estimated £377,100 was lost from sick days due to assault. These figures are conservative estimates, not taking into account the costs of therapy, taking the assailant to court, or other cumulative effects of injury.

A MODERN APPROACH

Visible deterrents

Two very viable options to significantly reduce abuse and assault against LAS frontline staff would be to either implement on-vehicle CCTV or body worn cameras. Both would act as visible deterrents to individuals whose intent is to assault frontline responders. Vehicle CCTV is now quite commonplace with other ambulance services across the UK. Some ambulance services, such as those in Merseyside and Cheshire, had CCTV as far back as 2004.¹⁸ The equipment uses straight forward, user friendly technology which allows staff to quickly activate the system at the first sight of trouble by hitting a “panic strip” that extends across the length of the vehicle.¹⁹

Cameras could be placed not only inside the vehicle, but facing outwards, as most assaults have been found to occur away from the ambulance.²⁰ The East Midlands Ambulance Service estimates the cost of CCTV systems at £400 per vehicle in 2013, including inside and outside cameras and video storage systems.²¹

Further to this point - as crews will be far away from the vehicles when initially responding to incidents - body-worn cameras (much like some UK police forces wear) could be given to first responders. Much like the on-vehicle systems they are only activated by staff when an incident is either in progress or when entering a dangerous environment. The Staffordshire police trial of police body-worn cameras led to

13. http://www.londonambulance.nhs.uk/news/news_releases_and_statements/ilford_man_who_punched_ambulan.aspx?lang=en-gb

14. http://www.londonambulance.nhs.uk/news/news_releases_and_statements/assault_sentence_welcomed.aspx

15. 633 (days lost) / 181 (average number of LAS work days a year) = 3.5

16. London Ambulance Service, Freedom of Information request data - March 2014

17. Ibid.

18. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/merseyside/3925661.stm>

19. <http://www.southcentralambulance.nhs.uk/content/homepage-feature/assaults-on-ambulance-staff-on-the-increase.ashx>

20. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-22356712>

21. https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/information_139

significant reductions in disorder and anti-social behaviour.²² After the successful trial the Staffordshire police rolled out 550 cameras at a cost of £660 per camera, and the associated equipment to access the footage.²³

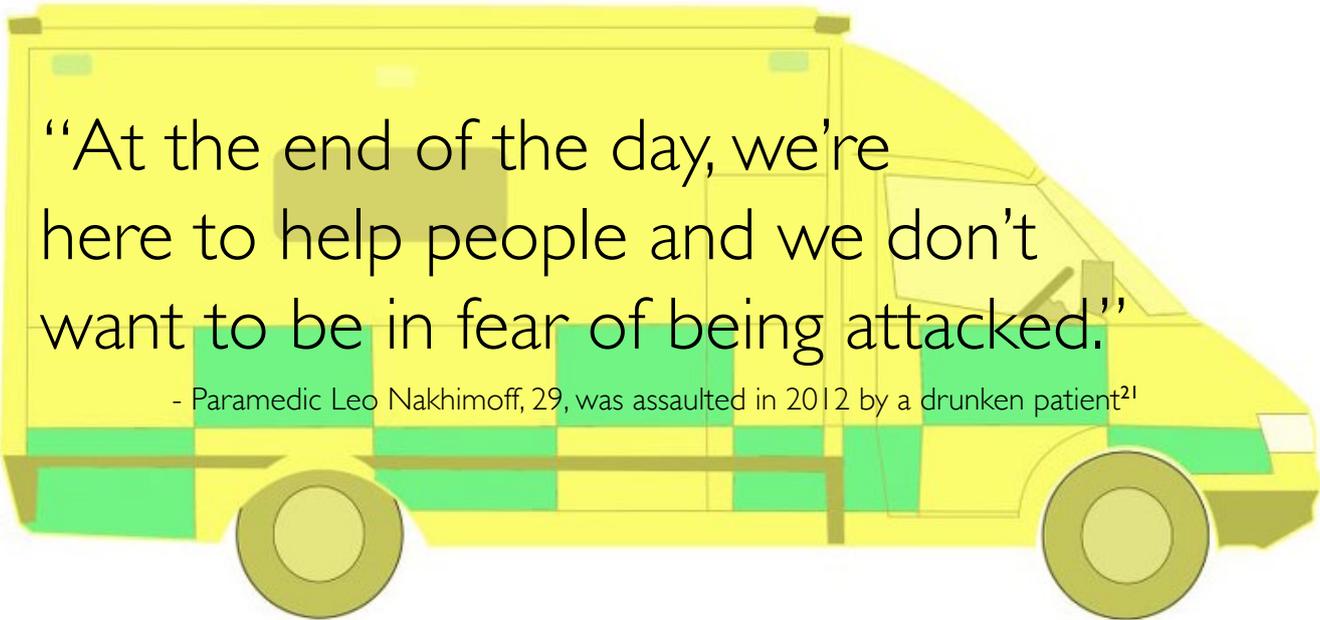
Better Prosecutions

As discussed earlier, prosecutions are a significant deterrent to abuse and assault against LAS crews. On-vehicle CCTV and body-worn cameras enable easier reporting of crimes against staff as they do not require lengthy descriptions of the crime, just a short description with the submission of the video evidence. The recorded evidence also results in shorter trials as there is less chance of dispute over the events in question.

Implementation

Implementation of on-vehicle CCTV or body-worn cameras should first be explored through a trial of the technology before significant investment is made. A trial might consist of body-worn cameras being given to crews visiting any of 390 residences marked as violent/abusive. With one or more cameras available in each of the LAS's 70 ambulance stations²⁴ many of the dangerous call-outs could have surveillance available. The cost of a rollout of 100 cameras, if similar technology to the Staffordshire police were used, would be £66,000 which is approximately half the average annual cost of sick days due to assault. Other distributions of the camera technology should be trialled as well to fully test the viability of the technology in a myriad of circumstances, such as crews stationed at busy times on high streets, or during large public events in London.

If the trial of the body-worn camera proves successful, a pilot of 100 on-vehicle CCTV systems could be initiated. Using a similar priced system to that of the East Midlands Ambulance Service, a trial of 100 vehicles would cost approximately £40,000, which is less than one-third the financial total of the yearly sick bill due to assault. It is the expectation of this report that these technologies, if proven feasible, would pay for themselves though the time saved in prosecuting assault cases. This technology would also act as a visual deterrent with the aim of reducing the number of assaults, which would have various savings.



“At the end of the day, we’re here to help people and we don’t want to be in fear of being attacked.”

- Paramedic Leo Nakhimoff, 29, was assaulted in 2012 by a drunken patient²¹

22. http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/stoke/hi/people_and_places/newsid_8439000/8439390.stm

23. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2459991/Police-force-equip-officers-body-worn-video-cameras.html>

24. http://www.londonambulance.nhs.uk/working_for_us/career_opportunities.aspx

25. http://www.londonambulance.nhs.uk/news/news_releases_and_statements/ambulance_workers_assaulted_da.aspx?lang=en-gb

CONCLUSION

The London Ambulance Service despite its work on reducing the volume of abuse and assault on staff still faces a problem. The toll that such assaults take on crews both physically and mentally is unacceptable. It is clear that reducing assaults has the potential of paying for itself. In light of this we recommend the London Ambulance Service:

- 1. Immediately begin a year-long trial of 100 body-worn cameras. Distributing the cameras in varied settings would help evaluate the effectiveness of this technology in reducing assaults and speeding up the prosecution of future crimes against staff.**
- 2. Begin an information campaign to highlight the use of body-worn cameras by crews, and the increased ability to prosecute assailants.**
- 3. Following the body-worn camera trial, the LAS should trial 100 on-vehicle CCTV systems to further improve the chances of prosecuting criminals and reducing future assaults.**

The capital cost of the 200 CCTV camera pilot would be an estimated £106,000 – less than just one year of the annual £125,700 sick bill caused by attacks and injury.



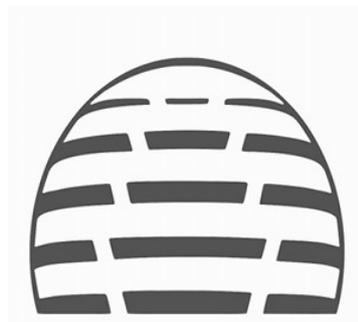
FEEDBACK

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