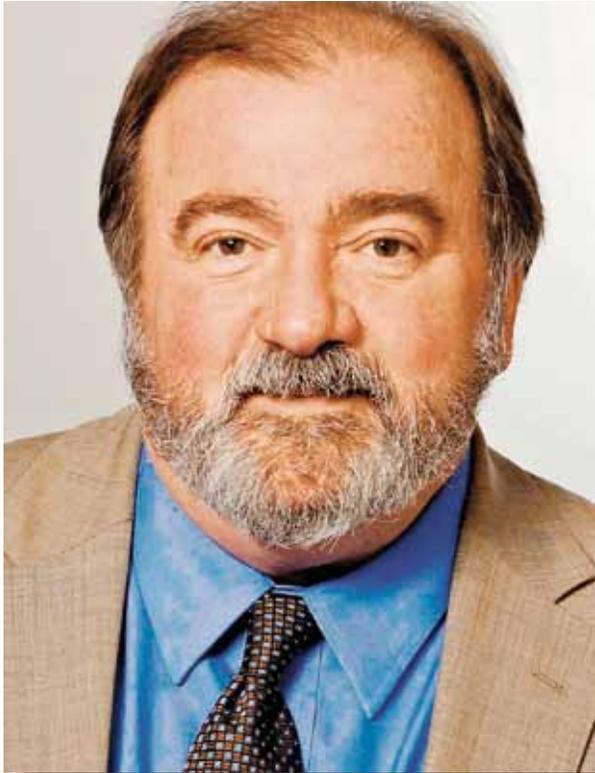

The EMS Experience

Saluting those with 20 years or more in EMS

Paul E. Pepe, MD, MPH



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What was your first day on the job in Texas EMS?

It was November 1, 1982, a Monday morning. I reported to the Houston Fire Department (HFD) headquarters as HFD's inaugural medical director. The entire command staff was there, quite curious to know what this new "entity" would be like and what impact it might have. Likewise, I was anxious to see what they needed and how I could support them.

At one point I asked if I could review "this past weekend's EMS run records." The group chuckled. We were talking about more than 1,000 incidents I'd be reviewing! Like the proverbial deer in the headlights, I began to realize the sheer magnitude of the new task I was taking on.

Then, a very wise (and visionary)

assistant fire chief, Dennis Holder, said, "Here, just go find out what our folks are facing out there on the streets!" He handed me an HFD "walkie-talkie" and keys to a "vintage" HFD response vehicle.

What happened over the next several years on the streets has been well-chronicled in scientific studies and media reports—and it laid the basis for a whole new subspecialty—EMS and prehospital medicine.

Which services have you worked for over the years?

I began my EMS career in 1977 as a naïve but enthusiastic assistant to the brilliant medical directors for the Seattle Fire Department, Drs. Leonard Cobb and Mike Copass. Serving there till my fall 1982 arrival in Houston, I remained at HFD until 1996 when I was recruited to Pennsylvania and became their Commonwealth Emergency Medical Director (statewide EMS medical director), a new position created for me. I held that post until 2000 when I moved back to Texas and became Dallas' director of Medical Emergency Services for Public Safety, Public Health and Homeland Security and medical director for the BioTel (EMS) system, now a time-honored collaboration of nearly 20 EMS agencies in metropolitan Dallas. Even while I was in Pennsylvania,

however, I maintained my Texas medical license and continued to serve our state as a medical director for AED programs in Texas.

Why did you get into EMS?

In Seattle, I was training as an ICU specialist, conducting high-profile research at the trauma center. But I began to appreciate, more and more, two principal concepts: 1) "The earlier the intervention, the better the results" (my #1 mantra); and 2) the need for intensive medical oversight of the entire continuum of care we called the "Chain of Survival/Recovery" (concepts later published in scientific papers). I advocated that on-scene interventions were not only critical to the patient's continuum of care, but could even drive better in-hospital management by early identification and initiation of the required level of interventions and by doing the research that determines what works and what doesn't.

How has the field changed since you've been in it?

Tremendously! Full-time medical direction is found in many large EMS systems, and EMTs, paramedics and first responders have become very sophisticated about quality assurance, patient safety and even research, largely because we now have technological advances that demonstrate better what we needed to improve upon—and what we haven't been doing so well (e.g., CPR quality issues and outcome data tracking).

Is there a particular moment or call that stands out?

Yes. At a news conference in 1996, I was asked what I was most proud of during my 14 years with HFD. Was it all the ground-breaking research HFD had accomplished? The dramatic increase in documented life-saving? The striking decline in complaints or the numerous media stories that visually recorded our cutting-edge trauma care? “No”, I said, “It was a particular case I responded to with an engine company when the closest paramedic unit was delayed trying to make it through that Friday afternoon’s rush-hour traffic.”

In that sad circumstance, a young boy had found his relatively young father (in his 40s) face down and lifeless at their home: an unwitnessed (and likely futile) cardiac arrest case. Our efforts, as expected, were not successful, but I decided to transport the man considering his age and the significant psycho-social aspects (that frightened young boy and his devastated mom were also our patients!).

As I prepared to drive away with the wife in my car, one of the HFD engine’s firefighters asked to speak to me.

Now this was in the early days when firefighters often resented being sent out as first responders on what often appeared to be non-emergent cases. I actually was expecting some related complaint, but instead, it became a great moment of pride.

Arising from the vehicle, out of earshot from the wife, that firefighter asked, with clear compassion, “Doc, is it okay if we stay back here a bit to clean up that vomit and blood in the bedroom? She doesn’t need to come back to that.”

What I was hearing was evidence of a new philosophical trend moving among the veteran firefighters — a new evolving sense of public service duties.

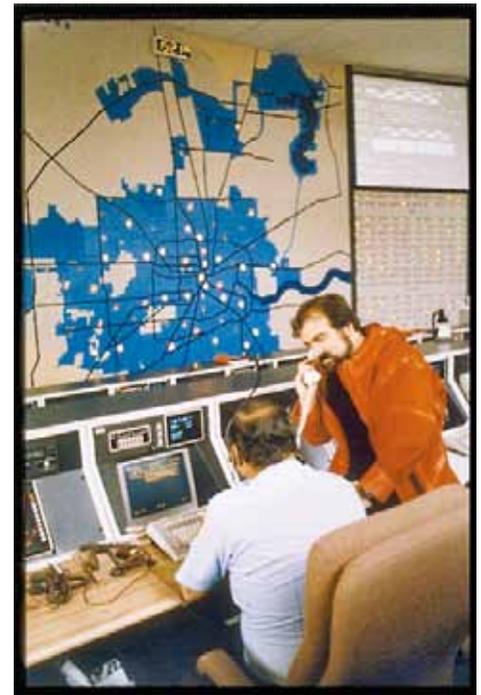


Pepe on Houston Fire Department ambulance November 1982

We in EMS and public safety as a whole are, in many ways, the ultimate public servants. Though a four-bugle chief at HFD, it was never beneath Dennis Holder to take his turn at chest compressions or pick up leftover on-scene trash following an expedited trauma transport—or to help an elderly woman out of her fire-ravaged home! That day I was witnessing a renewed sense of duty that was starting to unfold more and more in Houston—all because of EMS. It would make Chief Holder so proud! In turn, I am so proud of what EMS personnel across Texas now deliver to our patients—not just the outstanding medical care—but the tremendous sense of public service.

What has been your favorite part of your career in EMS?

Making on-scene responses with EMS crews, be it for a major catastrophic event, or just the daily awkward, unpleasant sociological



Pepe at Houston Fire Department dispatch 1989

situations. I find myself most content when I am on-scene helping out—and hopefully showing how much I care about those public servants in EMS who take care of us, day in and day out!