

The EMS Experience

Saluting those with 20 years or more in EMS

Kenneth Cook, EMT-P



Kenneth Cook, EMT-P, has worked for several providers since 1979. He now works for Castro County EMS.

What was your first day on the job in EMS?

I went to work for the hospital in Hereford, Texas, in December of 1979 as a maintenance engineer. At the same time, the hospital was taking over responsibility for EMS in the city and county from the funeral homes. We had just taken delivery of the funeral homes' existing ambulances—one was a 1972 Chevrolet high-top van and the other a 1976 suburban. I was installing new (at that time) strobe lights on the suburban when we got, really, one of our first calls and *my* first-ever call. I was not even certified at the time, but I was added as part of the crew. The rest of the crew consisted of two RNs, one respiratory therapist, one of the funeral directors and my supervisor.

He was the head maintenance engineer and, as a volunteer firefighter, was the only one of us with any experience operating an emergency vehicle. I had never even been around anyone who was sick, much less been in the position I was about to accept.

In those days, whenever we got a call, whoever was near by usually went. So there may have been two people and there may have been four. This call was for a sick person, and I was told to ride along as an extra man and learn how things operated. I piled into the passenger seat and rode to the scene. When we got there it was an elderly man in cardiac arrest. I was told that everyone needed to ride in the back to do patient care, and that I would have to drive the

ambulance back to the hospital. The only ambulances I had ever seen during those days always seemed to be going very fast. So I got into the driver's seat and drove to the hospital—basically hitting all the curves and dips at top speed and ultimately throwing everyone in the back all over the place. The patient passed away, and I figured my career in EMS was either over or at least had to go up from there.

Which services have you worked for over the years?

I have stayed pretty close to home and worked for only about five different services—a couple of those were for many years. I was in Hereford for about 18 years, where I got my training through a nearby college. My paramedic book was the DOT manual. I also became a basic EMS education coordinator and then an advanced EMS education coordinator in Hereford, where we set up an in-house initial and continuing education training program. I moved on to Dimmitt, Texas, and Castro County EMS. I initially worked there for about two years, left, and have since come back as a paramedic. For about ten years I worked part-time for Friona EMS and helped start an education program there, too. I guess the most fun I had was working at Cal Farley's Boys Ranch EMS—I enjoyed working with the kids out there tremendously.

Why did you get into EMS?

At first it was just something cool to do, then as I grew into it and began to understand it more, I realized that I enjoyed helping people and trying to make a difference in their lives. I began to realize that, no matter what the outcome, with every person I touched I could also touch so many

other people. Those folks may not be directly involved, and I may never know them, but my actions have an effect on them through the way I treat their loved ones. I also find myself amazed at the things that, with my growing education, I have the ability to do—things I never thought I could do before becoming a medic. I like the challenge of what makes this profession unique in the world: We never know what we are going to be doing five minutes from now and we are knowledgeable and skillful enough to walk into an unknown situation, in someone else's domain, and make decisions and deal with whatever the situation may be. I honestly believe there's not another profession like it anywhere and the only people who understand it at all are the people who do it every day.

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

I have watched EMS grow. In the good (or bad) old days when our equipment, communications and training were pretty limited, we basically just ran up and down the streets at 100 miles an hour and picked up people and flew back to the hospital. Today I think the doctors have a better understanding of what our job is, and therefore they are more confident that we have the knowledge and ability to provide quality patient care in the field. Through research and training we have gained quite a bit of technology and specialized techniques that allow us to take our time and provide good prehospital patient care. There's one thing I think is kind of sad—the pay for this profession has not come up to match our more advanced knowledge and skills. I believe this problem has, and will continue to, hurt the profession as a whole by causing people who might otherwise have chosen EMS as a career to go into other professions. It has also caused excellent medical professionals to leave EMS settings for other, better-paying medical



When Kenneth Cook started in EMS, the hospital had just taken over EMS from the funeral home and he drove an ambulance on his first call. Cook went on to become a paramedic.

positions. So, we who have been in this profession for so many years and who have worked hard to help it grow and be recognized are disappointed to see the decline in those areas.

Is there a particular moment or call that stands out?

You know, anyone who has been in this profession for any length of time has his or her ghosts, and I have mine. We all have the highs and the lows that we live with. Although there are a few people walking around who will tell (and have told) anyone that I saved their life, I know that although I may have had a hand in the event, there is also a higher authority who gets to make the ultimate decision of what the outcome will be. Of all the things that I can think of that were memorable events in my career, none really stand out as more significant than another. The thing I enjoy thinking about overall is

seeing the people who I have taught through the years move up and become successful supervisors and leaders in the profession in their own right. That means more to me than any particular event.

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

The people of the EMS profession. I have worked with new people and people who have been in it as long as I have. There have been many people with different opinions, beliefs and ways of doing things, but the thing that makes us all who we are is our desire to help others when they need help the most. There are good people all over the world, but not all of them consider the importance of their families as well as the public need on a daily basis. Some of the best of those people who do have that level of consideration are in this profession, and I have been blessed to have known many of them in my career.