

PARAMEDIC TRAINING IN SUICIDE AWARENESS

The HSE National Ambulance Service College has moved to formalise its suicide awareness training for paramedic students, to fully equip and train these first responders to deal with cases of attempted suicide. Report by Michael McHale.

It's a job all too common for emergency services personnel – the call-out to the scene of a suicide in Ireland. A total of 459 deaths in 2014 were registered as suicides in 2014, compared to less than half this number (196) dying in road traffic collisions last year.

Suicide rates are still a major cause of concern, so it's essential that first responders are fully equipped to deal with cases where there may be a possibility that such deaths can be prevented.

"Sometimes it's alarming the number of students who actually encounter death by suicide," Assistant Chief Ambulance Officer Shane Knox says of his trainee paramedics' experiences when out on placement as part of their 19-month training programme.

"Suicide deaths or self-harm are common calls for us now, so we have to address the training need for staff – ultimately for the patient, but to support our staff when they're going out there. It was an identification of training needs, through feedback, from the various staff members."

As Knox explains, suicide awareness training has always been an important part of the training paramedics, advanced paramedics and emergency medical technicians receive, under the guidelines laid out by the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC).

However, recent steps taken mean that this training will be further augmented and emphasised through specific initiatives – namely, SafeTalk ('Suicide Alertness for Everyone') and STORM (Skills Training of Risk Management).

SafeTalk is a two-hour programme that prepares participants to identify individuals

with thoughts of suicide and connect them to the appropriate resources.

These specific suicide alertness skills are taught with the expectation that the person learning them will use them to help reduce the risk of suicide in their own communities.

STORM TARGETS HEALTHCARE

"SafeTalk within the HSE is regarded as First Aid – it's really the first attempt. It's an introduction to that awareness, if you like," Shane Knox tells Emergency Services Ireland.

Having introduced the programme to students in 2015, the National Ambulance Service College now plans to introduce STORM, which builds upon the knowledge taught in SafeTalk.

As Knox explains, the decision to teach STORM instead of ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) comes down to what best suits the college's learning environment.

"Just from the research, the distinct difference is that ASIST is for everybody – it's for lay people and professionals – but STORM is specifically centred towards healthcare professionals.

"The Government of Scotland commissioned a report on the various types of training like that, and actually suggested that STORM is more appropriate for healthcare professionals."

Knox says that another benefit of STORM over ASIST is that ASIST is a two-day programme which is very rigid and



"Sometimes it's alarming the number of students who actually encounter death by suicide," says Assistant Chief Ambulance Officer Shane Knox.

participants must do the two days, "whereas STORM is more modular, so it would fit our training model better as well".

INTERACTIVE MODULES

STORM consists of four core modules: assessment of risk, safety planning, problem solving, and future safety planning. The programme is certifiable from the University of Manchester, and outside of its core areas, it can be adapted to best suit the needs and requirements of various staff within the emergency services, such as the communications control centre.

Knox also describes STORM as more interactive. "There's role play, there's video feedback, and it's behavioural too, so it's obviously about changing your behaviour.

Preparations for rolling out the programme are already underway, with instructors at the National Ambulance Service College having taken part in teaching courses for the programme in October.

The College's priority is to introduce STORM for its incoming students first, before expanding the programme to existing paramedics, advanced paramedics and emergency medical technicians over time. The timeframe for this expansion is contingent on the national training plan prepared by PHECC each year.

"By the end of the year we'll have a plan developed for next year on what's to happen in terms of training nationally. But that will be driven by PHECC and their standards and clinical practice guidelines. So, for example, if they say that we're going to bring in a new medication, then we need to get that as a matter of priority – we need to train all the staff in the country, so that would take priority in the plan. So we won't be able to determine that plan until nearer the end of the year.

"The intention is to get STORM out there, but that is entirely contingent on the plan and the priorities in that plan. But it will be out there in terms of the colleges in Tallaght and in Ballinasloe. So, all students coming in now and in the future will be introduced to STORM training."

AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

The need for suicide awareness training for emergency personnel has been highlighted nationally by Elber Twomey, who has campaigned on the issue in recent years after a tragic incident saw a suicidal man crash into her family's car while on holiday in the south west of England.

Elber's 16-month old son died instantly in the collision, while her husband Con passed away from his injuries 10 months later. Five-and-a-half months pregnant at the time of the crash, Elber recovered but sadly her unborn daughter Elber-Marie did not survive.

Elber's work in highlighting the need for such training led to An Garda Síochána implementing ASIST into its Garda training



Pictured at the opening of the new HQ for the HSE National Ambulance Service at the Rivers Building in Tallaght were (l-r): Supervisor Gavin Doyle, Health Minister Leo Varadkar and Dispatcher Mick Mangán. (Pic: Sasko Lazarov/ Photocall Ireland)

since September 2014. Aware of her tragedy, Knox is hopeful that the programmes now being introduced for student paramedics will make it less likely for such a tragic incident to occur in Ireland, but is aware that no-one can guarantee that incident's like Elber's won't happen. "There's no one way of addressing suicide. It's all an integral part of a bigger policy, and this is one bit that we can contribute positively to, by educating our own staff and our own students.

"It's part of a bigger strategy which will integrate with the HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention and all the public policy that's developed for that. But it certainly, you would imagine, assist.

"Even the research on STORM in the UK would suggest there was a decrease (in such incidents). But you can't correlate the decrease to STORM training alone, because there are more factors. But you would imagine it would assist the patient, which is the primary focus of it all, and support our staff."

FASTER INCIDENT RESPONSE

These new developments come just months after the ambulance service opened its new state-of-the-art National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) in Tallaght.

Situated at the Rivers Building in South County Dublin, the building will also house the National Aeromedical Co-ordination Centre and the National Ambulance College, where student paramedics will train in classes of 24 using the most up-to-date teaching equipment and technology.

It is expected that the new ambulance centre will lead to quicker turn-out and incident response times by emergency ambulance crews. The new centre replaces the regional-based ambulance control centres which have been in operation for many years.

The NEOC in Tallaght is electronically linked to its 'sister centre' in Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal, where both centres will receive all 999/112 calls from across the country.