A qualitative analysis of stressors affecting 999 ambulance call handlers' mental health and well-being

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The problem?

In order to deliver safe and effective healthcare to patients the NHS needs to create a supportive working environment for its staff. **Healthcare professionals report high levels of physical and mental illness** which can be related to their work[1,2].

Work-related stress can result in **poor retention rates** and **poor staff wellbeing, which impacts on patients' experiences and care quality**[3]. As such there is a need to focus on health and wellbeing of NHS staff.

What did we do?

We aimed to understand how 999 call handlers working within Yorkshire Ambulance Service (YAS) experience burnouts and how these can be reduced based on job and personal resilience mechanisms.

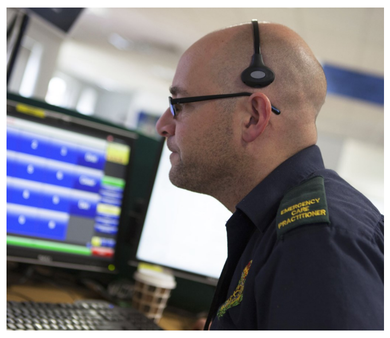
A qualitative study design. We **interviewed 18 YAS staff** via telephone (13 women and 5 men working between 1 and 23 years in the role). Thematic analysis of the data was undertaken.

What did we find?

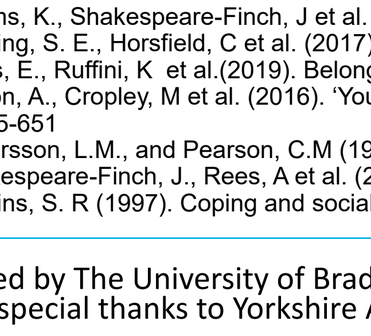
Sources of burnout are related to the amount of difficult calls, public incivility, media representation, working environment, job norms, and work-life balance.

"We're told in training that the key to it is to ignore the behaviours of the caller… go for the crux of what they're ringing for… It's a really hard thing to do… It's not something you stand for… in normal life."

"I can be so exhausted at the end of a shift, I can get in my car and just burst into tears cause I'm so tired or something's upset me or something's wound me up."



Support to reduce the frequency and impact of burnout includes changes to the physical environment, support from the organisation as well as from colleagues, friends and family and personal coping mechanisms.



"You've got to have your little victories through the day… I just go where there's a bit of green just to sort my head a little bit sometimes and it's nice to just get out of the room."

"We're lucky that we have that close-knit circle around us… You've got four other people around you who could probably pick up on what's going on and step forward and say, 'Right I'll deal with that.' "

What's next?

Staff may require an increased level of support, such as skills to cope[4]. Difficult, such as abusive, calls can be particularly stress inducing. Public perceptions, and cultural norms within the organisation, may need to shift to reduce stress and burnout. Incivility is an important area of focus[5]. Social support[6,7] and sense of belonging[3] are key to resilience of ambulance service staff. Organisational support and self care can benefit 999 ambulance call handlers. 999 ambulance call handlers' views are essential to co-designed solutions. More holistic and targeted interventions are needed to reduce burnout within this critical group within the NHS workforce.

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