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Published in:
Occupational and Environmental Medicine

DOI:
10.1136/oem.60.5.373

Citation for published version (APA):
Sluiter, J. K., van der Beek, A. J., & Frings-Dresen, M. H. W. (2003). Medical staff in emergency situations: severity of patient status predicts stress hormone reactivity and recovery. Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 60, 373-375. DOI: 10.1136/oem.60.5.373
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Medical staff in emergency situations: severity of patient status predicts stress hormone reactivity and recovery

J K Sluiter, A J van der Beek, M H W Frings-Dresen

Background: Although repetitive exposure to stressful situations is thought to habituate the physical stress responses, work stress is experienced by medical personnel in emergency and intensive care units; performance should, however, remain stable over time.

Aims: To investigate the neuroendocrine reactions (reactivity during and recovery after work) in experienced emergency caregivers during emergency situations.

Methods: A within subjects pre-post design was studied in the natural work environment of 20 municipal Dutch emergency caregivers. A stress protocol was developed in which the biomarker cortisol was measured in saliva at baseline, during the emergency period, and during recovery. Four scenarios were tested between subjects in which the severity of the emergency situation and the time of day were taken into account.

Results: Greater endocrine reactions were shown during and after the handling of patients in direct life threatening situations during morning hours compared to the handling of patients who were not in direct life threatening situations.

Work and work related changes in health and wellbeing of both doctors and nurses have become the subject of growing concern in recent years. The long term effects of work stress and the higher incidences of burn-out of medical staff in emergency and intensive care units compared to other units have been subject of research (for example, Ferrari et al'). Part of the problem could be the denial of the effect of stress and fatigue (time of day) on own performance by medical staff, as shown by Sexton and colleagues. In addition, repetitive exposure to episodes of emotional stressors (such as the struggle between life and death in the emergency room) is thought to participate in tissue damage through overproduction of stress hormones or the lack of shutting off these responses.

Most studies have focused on subjective experiences, although some publications have assessed the magnitude of the stress response in the natural work environment. Although the magnitude of the endocrine reaction has been defined, information about the severity of the stressful context, time of day, and duration of physiological reactivity is lacking.

The aims of this study, therefore, are: (1) to assess cortisol reactivity during and after handling patients in emergency situations; and (2) to differentiate outcomes by severity of patients and time of day.

METHODS

Over a period of three months, 20 Dutch, male ambulance paramedics (average 42 years of age (SD 5) and 16 years of experience in the job (SD 7)) were observed and monitored during their work in Amsterdam after written informed consent was obtained. Salivary cortisol measurements during and after emergency calls were monitored for each subject on at least one working day. The acute stress protocol that is used as method in most stress research in laboratory settings was applied: sampling of the baseline values of salivary cortisol concentrations took place at the moment of the incoming emergency call (baseline), followed by repeated sampling immediately after delivery of the patient to the hospital (post 0), and two recovery samples at 15 and 30 minutes after delivery (post 15 and post 30, respectively). Protocols were taken into account only when no other tasks were asked for during recovery or, more precisely, during the period between the post 0 and post 30 samples. Post hoc, protocols were labelled “severe” if resuscitation took place or if the patient’s life was threatened acutely by acute heart failure, accidents, shootings, or stabbings. Time of day at which the whole protocol took place was registered; for the outcome measure cortisol was labelled as “circadian high” between 4 and 10 am and as “circadian low” outside this time frame. The above mentioned categorisation revealed four between-subjects scenarios.

Salivary cortisol was analysed with a time resolved fluorescence immunoassay, in which a stable cortisol-biotin conjugate was used in combination with rabbit cortisol antibodies for assessment of cortisol concentrations. The lower detection limit was 0.1 nmol/l. Intra- and inter-assay variability were <10% and <12%, respectively. Endocrine reactions were defined following Fischer and colleagues’ as reactions of a minimum 2.5 nmol/l cortisol above baseline values.

After testing differences in mean baseline cortisol excretion between the four described scenarios: (1) mean endocrine reaction per scenario was described; and (2) a between subjects multivariate analyses of variance was performed with cortisol excretion as dependent variables and the two factors (severity and time of day) as independent variables.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS
The results of this study showed that the severity of the patient and time of day are predictors of neuroendocrine reactions and lack of recovery in experienced medical staff. During (reactivity) and after (lack of recovery) severe emergency situations, and mainly during morning hours, endocrine reactions in cortisol excretion were found.

The fact that the measurements were taken in the natural work environment was the main cause of the interruption of about one third of the original observed emergency periods because in these cases, continuing intervening tasks were asked for during the “experimental recovery time”.

Fischer and colleagues showed that job experience had a protective effect on the magnitude of the physiological response during stressful situations in acute medical care. With this finding in mind plus the aforementioned knowledge about ongoing tasks, the present results might be even more worrying for less experienced staff.

From the present study a suggestion could be to plan more flexible breaks for medical staff with comparable tasks by allowing some mental rest for endocrine recovery after treatment of patients in acute life threatening situations during the morning hours.

Because cortisol is seen as one of the important biomarkers for allostatic load, physicians and paramedics should understand that repeated exerted efforts towards patients in high emergency situations might influence the risk of developing adverse health reactions in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
This project was mainly funded by The Netherlands Organization of Scientific Research (NWO-PVA). The samples were analysed in the Centre for Psychobiological and Psychosomatic Research of Trier, Germany in the laboratory of Prof. Clemens Kirschbaum. J Sluiter, M Frings-Dresen, and A van der Beek were executive of or responsible for the project. J Sluiter wrote the first draft, which was read, supplemented, and approved by the other two authors.

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Accepted 16 August 2002

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The main finding is that male ambulance paramedics have a higher salivary cortisol response to severe situations than to not so severe situations. This is not surprising, but it is shown in an elegant and professional way. The conclusions, however, are controversial.

The paramedics have a high level of cortisol 30 minutes after the severe events. This is characterised as a “lack of recovery”; it is assumed that this is not “optimal neuroendocrine coping”, and changes in routines are suggested. Why? I would be more worried for patients, and for the paramedics, if they did not react to severe emergencies with arousal. Also, I would not be worried if this arousal lasts for 30 minutes. We are barely into the half life of plasma (and salivary) cortisol.

To the best of my knowledge, there are no hard data suggesting pathophysiological consequences of being awake, even wide awake, for hours on end. To refer to this as “stress” is just confusing and suggests relations that are not proven. However, feedback to the paramedics based on these interpretations may lead to constant worries. These are not based on facts, but may have potential after-effects. Only when the aftermath interferes with the restitution over the whole 24 hour period, potential health effects may occur, as shown elegantly in Sluiter’s previous work.1,2

The authors interpret their findings as a lack of “habituation”. The habituation term should perhaps be restricted to the abolishment of the orienting response to a non-signal stimulus. However, they refer to the fact that arousal persists even if the paramedics have been exposed to similar situations before. From coping theory one might expect at least a reduction in the response with increasing experience, and increasing trust in one’s skill in handling these emergencies. The data do not allow conclusions on this. It seems reasonable to assume that such a reduction may have occurred, but the arousal does not reduce to zero. This would be incompatible with the high performance and the handling of strong emotions involved in medical emergency care.

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