



# VITALS

A Weekly Safety Newsletter For Medical Transport Professionals

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## Too Old To Work On An Ambulance Or A Wheelchair Van? Part 1



A recent article described the huge influx of older adults into EMT and Paramedic training programs. Older adults in this context means people who did something else for 20 years or so and had to reconstruct their work lives when whatever industry they were in collapsed. New applicants include everybody from bartenders to freight pilots. Retirees have become an important labor pool. Other than inadequate retirement income, there are other reasons why they remain in the work force. A working paper issued in the March 06 "Bulletin on Aging and Health" detailed that over a six-year period, retirement was associated with a 5-16% increase in difficulties with mobility, a 5-6% increase in illnesses and a 6-9% decline in mental health. 38% of workers aged 50 to 64 plan to work beyond 65. In short, as medical transportation becomes less attractive to younger people, will we replace them with older workers? If so, what can we do to maintain a safe work environment with an age diverse workforce?

The goal of ergonomics is to design the workplace and work tasks so that productivity and safety are improved. The ANSI definition of ergonomics is: "The application of a body of knowledge (life sciences, physical science, engineering, etc.) dealing with the interactions between man and the total working environment, such as atmosphere, heat light, and sound, as well as tools and equipment of the workplace."

What happens as we age? Strength and flexibility decrease. Reaction time increases. In general, motor skills, hearing and sight deteriorate. The physiological changes of aging all contribute to reduced efficiency and greater likelihood of fatigue. Psychosocial needs of older workers center on shift preferences, differences in learning style, and a greater likelihood of not socializing well. Fortunately, the approach to dealing with older workers is applicable to all workers, that is, ergonomics.

*Lance Perry, a Zurich Senior Engineer/Ergonomist, describes ergonomics as a Four-Step Protocol:*

1. Identify the physical, physiological and psychological demands of the job.
2. Identify the physical, physiological and psychological capabilities of the worker.
3. Identify the physical, physiological and psychological mismatches between the demand and the capability.
4. Minimize the mismatches through education and training, and work, tool, equipment and environmental design.

Another way to state this protocol is: What **MUST** our employees do to safely and successfully perform their jobs? What **CAN** they do without help? What **HELP** do they need? What **SOLUTIONS** are available? Sounds like a ventilation/perfusion mismatch doesn't it? Instead of CPAP or PEEP, we'll use administrative and engineering control measures to achieve our ergonomic goals.

*The Article Continues Next Week*

