VITALS
A Weekly Safety Newsletter For Medical Transport Professionals

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Looking At An "Old" Line Of Duty Death: What's Changed?

I reviewed a NIOSH line of duty death investigation report from a few years ago. A young career firefighter/EMT was killed by blunt force head trauma as she sat belted in the captain's chair in the patient compartment. The driver estimated her speed at 30-35 mph, but due to the circumstances of the crash, the actual speed of the vehicle could not be determined. She was running with Emergency Warning Systems activated and apparently lost control of the vehicle due to hydroplaning, while changing lanes. The ambulance rotated, slid off the roadway, rolled onto the driver's side and impacted a tree.

There had been about six weeks of rotten weather prior to this event. Three hurricanes accompanied by other unstable weather conditions created circumstances in which emergency personnel worked long hours under adverse conditions. It was a summer day at 1726 hours. The road was wet, relatively flat and straight with a posted speed limit of 50 mph. The temperature was 78 degrees. Although there were other details given, we'll focus on the recommendations.

REPLACE WORN TIRES makes sense. Every daily vehicle inspection sheet that I've seen says "inspect tires". Other than checking tire pressure, tires should be taken out of service if they have cuts in the sidewall that penetrate to the cord, are defective, have a tread depth of 4/32 inch or less on any steering axle, or 2/32 inch or less on any non-steering axle at any two adjacent major tread grooves anywhere on the tire. Do we look at the whole tire or just walk around and look at the sidewalls? Are we trained to look for built-in tread wear indicators?

DRIVE SLOWLY ENOUGH TO PREVENT HYDROPLANING. If tires are under-inflated or have excessive tread wear, there will be a loss of traction. How well traction is achieved on a wet road is a function of factors such as vehicle speed, amount of water present and condition of the tires. On wet surfaces drivers should slow down, increase following distances, avoid hard braking or sharp turns and drive in the tracks of the vehicle in front of them. The tires in this case showed evidence of excessive tread wear. Was your first impulse not to believe the driver about her speed?

PEOPLE NEED DRIVING TRAINING AT LEAST TWICE A YEAR. This is a minimum. Driving is a behavior that should be scrutinized by everybody in an organization. Remedial training should occur whenever it is needed. Driving infractions must result in progressive discipline. Do drivers need to be acclimated to new trucks before they take them on the street? Should they be informed of different vehicle specifications before they check one out? Aren't these parts of safe driving, too?

AMBULANCE MANUFACTURING SAFETY STANDARDS SHOULD BE RESEARCHED, DEVELOPED AND IMPLEMENTED. Professional, licensed engineers are crucial to the development of effective safety standards. We shouldn't think that because we drive the trucks, we can design them safely. Our input for practicality is worthwhile and important, but limited. We need to become better educated so that we can recognize which manufacturers are using validated testing practices to confirm that the design of their vehicles results in the safest trucks possible. Are we satisfied with the current safety standards for vehicles and equipment? When we go to a medical transportation convention and look at vehicles do we think about safe vehicle design? Are there sharp edges and potential projectiles in the patient compartment that make it a hostile work environment? There is, thankfully, currently a great deal of activity in this area. Be involved.