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Cultural Anthropology

### **EMS In Uniform**

Throughout history, uniforms have been a way of distinguishing a person's status to the public. Uniforms state what we are and what we do. I want you to take a moment to think of someone in a uniform and what that uniform represents. Now think of how you would feel wearing that uniform. What role would you play? I currently work as an EMT for Richmond County Ambulance( RCA). and our motto is “ Courteous. Compassionate. care.” That is what our uniform represents. When I wear the uniform, I feel responsible, confident, and trustworthy.

In 1862, the father of US EMS; Major Jonathan Letterman established the US Ambulance Corps to triage wounded soldiers of the Army of the Potomac on active battlefields, rather than retrieving them at the end of battle. Because of the corps success at saving lives, Cincinnati, Ohio established the first civilian ambulance services.

EMTs have a few patches on their uniforms. On the right arm is the certification patch. The certification patch is rectangular with a curved top. On the very top, of the green with gold borders patch, it says “ New York State”, while on the bottom it says “Emergency Medical Technician. Slightly above Emergency Medical Technician, it says The New York State motto, Excelsior, meaning “ Ever Upward”. The center has several symbols such as the Star of Life, the

Staff of Aesculapius, and of course, the New York State Coat of Arms.

The star of life is one of the most recognized EMS symbols. It can be found virtually anywhere EMS is located such as Ambulances, uniforms, tech bags, and on license plates.

“When a person wearing the star of life appears, that caregiver represents all the power, strength and knowledge of every EMT who ever earned the Star Of Life... To the person in need of EMS salvation is all that matters, and hope comes shining through in the form of the Star of Life.”

(Morse). Usually blue, it has 6 sides representing the six functions of EMS; early detection, early reporting, early response, on scene care, care in transit, and transfer to definitive care.

As with many aspects of modern medicine, EMS has Greek origins. You may probably seen a staff with a snake wrapped around it on ambulances, and most commonly in the center of the star of life. This is the staff of Aesculapius. Aesculapius; son of Apollo, was the God of medicine. Because of this Zeus killed him because people weren't going to the underworld because of his healing abilities. Aesculapius' staff had a snake raped around, which, in ancient times, snakes were viewed as symbols of healing due to their ability to shed skin and produced venom to kill parasites within (Bohigian).

The Caduceus is an identical symbol, with just one additional snake and a pair of wings attached. The Caduceus was carried by Hermes, the messenger of the gods. Unfortunately, most people; civilian and health professional alike; do not know the difference between both, and don't actually know which is the true symbol of health. The Caduceus is seen as more

“aesthetically pleasing”, making it a more commonly used symbol, however the staff of Aesculapius is the true symbol of medicine for it has represented medicine since 800 BCE. ( Bohigian).

In 1778, New York State adopted its coat of arms. “ The center shows a ship and sloop on a river bordered by a grassy shore and a mountain range with the sun rising behind it. Liberty and Justice stand on either side, under an American Eagle.” ( New York Department of State).

Liberty stands on the left side holding a staff topped with a Phrygian cap representing Cap given to Roman slaves as an act of emancipation. Liberty stands on a Crown representing the lessening powers of the English Monarch. Justice stands on the right side blind folded, holding a sword upon the shield in her left hand and in her right a scale. “These symbols represent the impartiality and fairness required for the assessment of a merited award or punishment.”

On the left arm lays the company patch. It is a circular green patch with gold borders. In 1988, Richmond County Ambulance services opened its headquarters in Staten Island. After a few years, three more bases were opened in Brooklyn, Bronx, and Far Rockaway. This is why the top of the patch states “ Proudly Serving The Five Boroughs”. The bottom of the patch states the company’s motto, “Courteous. Compassionate. Care”. The arm patches however aren't the only two patches on the black button up collared uniform. The back of every EMS uniform states who we are and what agency we are a part of, distinguishing us from others.

The very first Civilian EMS uniform appeared in the 1960s, which was the decade of modern medicine. The most common EMS uniform would be white with similar patch placing as today,

and a collar with a right side chest pocket. Because most ambulances were run by funeral homes, ambulances were modified versions of Cadillac casket vehicles. Hospital run ambulance units were a little different. Ambulances were usually VolksWagon vans. Paramedics had on lab coats added as part of their uniforms and “nurse hats” which were white, oval shaped, and had a red cross in the middle still used as a medical symbol to tell the location of medical stands at events or by the American Red Cross and other health organizations.

However, unlike today, EMS uniforms did not resemble police uniforms, mainly due to colors and lab coats. Today, police and EMS uniforms tend to be mistaken due to both having the same or similar pants with big cargo pants to hold equipment. and tactical boots as part of the uniform. The shirts both most commonly can be described as navy blue button down and collared shirts. Some companies in NYC tend to have different colors such as senior care has a very light green shirt and dark green pants making them easily distinguishable from police. On the other hand, FDNY, hospital run EMS and other 911 or private companies such as RCA use uniforms not so easily distinguishable from Police.

In order to become an EMT, part of the train course is ambulance rotations. For my first rotation, my EMT instructor stated we needed to get collared navy blue shirts. I could find one at department stores, and so I went to the New York City Police Shop on Metropolitan Ave. There I purchased a patchless police shirt. Fast forward a little over a year later, I had an interview over zoom in which I wore my shirt. My interviewer said that our uniforms looked the same and at which I replied with “without the patches though”. A few weeks later, I had a psych patient who

refused treatment because he believed me and my partners were cops. This leads me to my next Point.

Many EMS professionals believe there should be a change in uniform. Melissa Turtinen of the Bring Me The News, published an article entitled “ Hennepin EMS Union says new uniforms will make them look like police, demand change”, stated that changing the 60 year old traditional tan-on-brown uniform to blue will put Paramedics, EMTs and dispatchers in danger because they can be mistaken for cops. Martin Scheerer, senior director of Hennepin EMS stated, ““felt they were literally in danger wearing the uniforms as they look too much like law enforcement”, following the death of George Floyd that sparked protests around the country. On the other hand, Libor Jany of the Star Tribune stated that “the change caused an immediate uproar among paramedics, some of whom said the new uniforms resembled police garb more than before...Others voiced more practical concerns. Union officials said that removing the caduceus — the traditional symbol of medicine featuring two serpents wrapped around a staff — from the uniforms lapel and making name patches optional will only further erode public trust. Furthermore, they said, several patches with the word "PARAMEDICS" are now the only thing distinguishing paramedics from law enforcement, which could cause confusion among non-English speaking patients.” Hennepin county isn't the only region facing this issue. All over the country, you can find EMTs who could speak of an experience where a patient confused them for cops. It is believed that changing the uniform will help gain more trust in the people we serve.

EMTs play an important role, if not the most important role in getting someone medical attention. In a person's time of need, they call 911 for help and when they see our uniform, they know we are there to help. Paul Fussel once said, "For an outfit to qualify as a uniform, many others must be wearing the same thing, all more or less conscious of a mysterious bonding by means of -cloth." This couldn't be further from the truth. Putting on the uniform connects us to the world of EMS.

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