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Experiences of stigma, posttraumatic stress disorder, and other mental health problems among paramedics in South Africa: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Understanding the experiences of South African paramedics is a necessary, yet under-researched area of mental health research. According to recent research, paramedics are at a higher risk of mental health issues in comparison to general norms (Awais et al., 2021). The following study of the lived experiences of South African paramedics made use of a qualitative, exploratory research design which aimed at capturing emergency medical personnel's experiences of stigma relating to mental health help-seeking behaviours. The Mental Illness Stigma Framework (MISF) and the Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) model formed the theoretical framework of the study through which the results were analysed and discussed. The study made use of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to obtain a cohort of seven paramedics (n=7), registered as Advanced Life Support (ALS) category. Participants were required to be over the age of 18 years old, and currently operational within the paramedical profession in order to meet the inclusion criteria. In-depth interviews were utilised to collect data from participants using a semi-structured interview schedule. Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis was used to code and analyse transcriptions of the interviews. Analysis of the results indicated three major themes which emerged from the data: 1) Paramedical Sub-culture and Discourse; 2) Paramedic Perceptions of Mental Health and Stigma; and 3) Recommended Intervention Strategies. The study found that mental health stigma, and confidentiality concerns to be the most frequently reported obstacles to help-seeking. The paramedic organisational culture was found to be an influential factor in the proliferation of mental health stigma and stereotypical belief systems. Furthermore, recommendations for future mental health interventions included: education and awareness, support from management, addressing confidentiality concerns, and increasing accessibility to mental health care.

Key Words: Help-Seeking Behaviours, Mental Health Stigma, Paramedic, PTSD, South Africa, Trauma.