

*A word of appreciation to
Vanessa Jackson from ER24 for the
kind assistance*

Professionalism And Ethics In Reporting From The Scene Of A Road Crash

By Johan Jonck
Arrive Alive

On the Arrive Alive website we provide information on road safety in an effort to educate and encourage safer road behaviour. This includes not only sections of content developed with the intention to provide safety advice – but also sharing the reality of road carnage and the trauma taking place on our roads daily.

Motorists are witnesses to crash scenes and ambulances heading to these scenes daily, and many of them try to find more information about these crashes on the Internet. Emergency medical services share reports from these crash scenes to the major media agencies and news about these crashes can be found online and in the printed media.

In the media there is often an attempt to attract as many “eyeballs” and interest as possible. Media agencies need the traffic to sell advertising space and remain financially sustainable in a highly competitive environment. This adds to the risk that crashes and road accidents will be

sensationalized to generate interest, attract more readers and then improve sales and advertising revenue. This sensationalism can be easily created in the headline to a story or a photo depicting the brutality or horrific nature of a nasty crash.

In our efforts to create awareness of road safety we need to be responsible and ethical. Our emergency medical response services have the same obligation towards road victims. In this process we are confronted by several questions, such as: What do we share? What do we not share? Does it benefit road safety if we share these crash reports – and more specifically – in the manner that we do and by using the visuals from the scene?

We decided to share insights to these crash reports by raising several questions with our road safety partner and emergency medical services provider ER24:

Can you take us through the process of how a crash reports gets to the media – by sharing and at what time is data collected and by whom?

Information on the incident is obtained as soon as possible. This means that we try and get information from an available person on scene, but should all resources be busy treating the injured, we would wait until a source becomes available. Our patient treatment is of utmost im-

portance and we therefore consider this to be our first priority. Once a crew is available to provide information, we start the process of release immediately after. Verifying information is extremely important to us - we obtain information from various sources to ensure as factual a release as possible.

At what time is the report drawn up and placed “into the system” and emailed?

We provide short “sound bites” as soon as we obtain enough information on the scene for a brief overview of the incident. Written information is sent out in most instances within an hour of the incident taking place, but updates could be sent after that should the duration of that incident be for an extended period of time.

Do the paramedics share their account of what happened to a central media or communications person?

Official written statements are sent from an official spokesperson.

Do any of the personnel receive media or social media training?

Some of our staff has had social media training and they will be responsible for their branch twitter accounts. ER24’s main twitter handle is updated by the trained communications team.

What are the mediums used for media exposure – ie –website, blog, etc?

We use the main social media platforms and blog to provide information. A banner on our official releases will have buttons on which to click in order to visit the various sites on which we offer information. Should you wish to obtain our releases, please email your details to

(Continued on page 34)



(Continued from page 33)



media@er24.co.za (journalists and media agencies only)

What are the biggest concerns with regards to media reports? How important is it to use the words "allegedly", "witnesses reported that", "it is believed that"?

Our biggest concern is the release of false information and private information pertaining to patients. Due to the nature of our business, we regard patient confidentiality extremely highly and do not provide information regarding an individual patient or matter of privacy to the public.

Having witnessed many crash scenes and read many reports from many different service providers- what to you believe are the biggest concerns for professionalism and ethical reporting?

We are completely against sensationalism of information. Reports are of a factual nature and should we not know an exact detail we are not afraid to say so. We also do not sensationalise the nature of injuries of our patients and value the fact that our communications team are all qualified intermediate life support practitioners knowing the difference between minor, moderate, serious and critical injuries.

In terms of ethical reporting, despite being registered journalists, we ensure that all photos and written releases maintain our patient's confidentiality.

Do you believe that there is value for road safety in sharing photos from the scene of the crash?

Most definitely! The more people visualise the road carnage in photos and reports the more we believe there may be even a subconscious effort for people to drive with more care.

Do you sometimes share a road safety message or some advice in the report?

We often post messages of road safety and awareness on our social media sites, and where we see trends we will write and release full articles with advice for safer roads.

What should the photographer avoid sharing – will you share registration numbers or actual bodies - and if not why not?

We always blur out registration numbers of vehicles, patient faces and remains of patients. Again we refer to the patient confidentiality and in attempt to prevent immediate recognition of a person or vehicle we blur these items. This does not always prevent recognition, but should someone need more information they are encouraged to contact the police for information on the crash and queries as to the occupants involved.

Blurring or cropping the remains of victims from our photos even when covered with the foil blanket, we are trying to protect the victims' family, and we are trying to prevent sensationalism and sharing of our pictures for reasons of sensationalism.

Is it important that crash victims not be identified via the photos of crash reports before notification to families can take place?

It is extremely important for us, and this is why we make a great attempt to make the photo about the crash and not the victim. Because of our large number of followers on our sites, this cannot be

completely avoided as we do state the whereabouts of the crash and the vehicle make is seen, but it must be emphasised that we care about each and every individual that our paramedics treat or have to declared dead, and our posting of photos of accidents is not in disrespect for those involved but to make attempts to prevent these types of accidents affecting other families.

Where can the public follow ER24 and emergency reports from across South Africa?

We have an open door policy at ER24 and we encourage people to express their views as to what we do and how we do it. It must however, be understood that we provide information for a reason, and we do it in a manner that does not go against our ethics and professional standards.

Our work is in emergency medical care, but we have a public responsibility to try and curb the horrific number of fatal and serious crashes on our road by sharing the knowledge we gain through those calls that we attend.

Conclusion

Where several emergency services respond to a crash scene it is especially important to keep the focus on the safety and well-being of the patient. We are beyond the days of "get the picture and send the report because nothing else matters". An important guideline often followed by the medical response services when providing us with reports from the crash scene is to maximize truth-telling and to minimize harm.

Reporting and capturing the crash scene visually is about communicating – and communicating about life includes the reporting of bad things such as crash scenes and trauma. As long as the photographer or reporter do not glorify the negative or sensationalize it, but portrays it as the scene unfolds, it can make an important contribution towards communicating a safety message as well!

