Emergency!

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Shamez Kassam Saves Lives for a Living

It's just like being in the middle of a TV show.

Four paramedics are crammed into the back of a speeding ambulance, all their attention focused on the elderly man in front of them. Minutes earlier, he collapsed on a city bus, holding his chest. Now, he's lying on a stretcher, his heart racing so fast it can't pump blood. A nearby heart monitor is beeping like crazy, and another machine drips fluids and medicine into a vein in his arm. One paramedic has just attached two pads, each the size of a man's hand, to his chest.

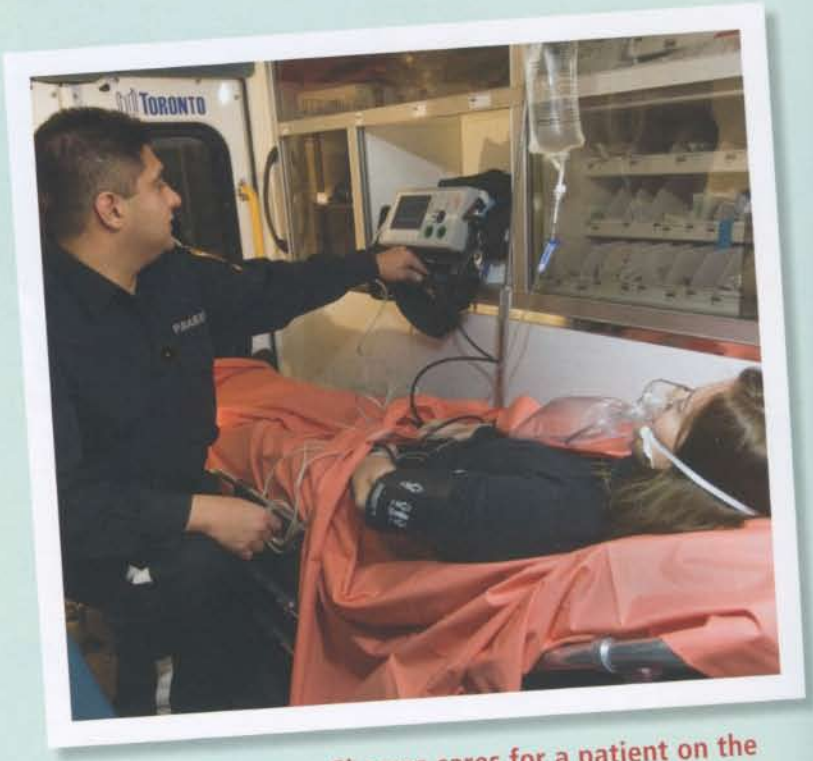
"Is everyone clear?"

The paramedics all make sure they're not touching the man or the stretcher.

"Ok, here we go. Sir, this is going to hurt a bit."

"*Ungh*!" The man doubles up as an electric shock hits his body.

Shamez Kassam and his fellow paramedics relax a little—the beeping from the heart monitor has slowed down. Now, their biggest concern is getting to the hospital.



Shamez cares for a patient on the way to the hospital.

Every centimetre of space inside an ambulance is used!

Being a Paramedic

"I've wanted to be a paramedic since I was in Grade Five," says Shamez. As a kid, he was a big fan of the show *Emergency!*, a 1970s medical drama. It showed paramedics jumping into their vehicles and saving lives all over Los Angeles, California. Even now, after 19 years on the job, Shamez still finds being a paramedic as exciting as it seemed on TV.

Skills and Stresses

A paramedic, like a doctor or nurse, is a health care professional. In emergency situations, they're the first people to treat you and make sure you get to the hospital.

Shamez is a level-three paramedic. "We essentially bring the hospital emergency room to you," he says. At level three, paramedics can give patients some of the drugs they may need, and do things like putting an artificial airway in a patient's throat.

It sounds complicated, doesn't it? Imagine trying to figure out what's wrong with someone, while panicked people are screaming at you to help their loved one. How would you stay cool and in control?

"You have to make yourself calm during these situations," Shamez says. "If you aren't calm, you could start making mistakes. And there are no second chances."

Being a paramedic also puts a lot of stress on the body. The most common injuries for paramedics are to the back or shoulder, most often caused by the lifting they have to do on the job. So, Shamez works out at home every other day, to stay strong, fit, and flexible.

Shamez uses this equipment regularly to treat his patients.

The hours are long, too. Paramedics work 12-hour shifts. Sometimes, things don't go as they should. Yet, Shamez loves being a paramedic. It's a job that matters, and no two calls are ever the same. "I like the fact that I'm helping people and make a difference in their lives," he says.

Shamez encourages kids who are interested in becoming paramedics to start volunteering at an early age. "Volunteering goes a long way," he says. Not only does it give some of the basic training in life-saving skills, it's also great exposure to dealing with the public, which is a key part of being a paramedic.

Shamez has been a paramedic for 19 years.

A Good Night

Just a little over half an hour since the call first came in, the ambulance pulls to a stop in front of the hospital's emergency entrance. The patient is rushed inside and the doctors take over. Meanwhile, Shamez climbs back into the ambulance and begins on his paperwork. His night is far from over, but at least it started off on a good note.

"Everything that happened," says Shamez, "was necessary to save that man's life. Those first minutes count. If we hadn't been there to help, he wouldn't have made it."

It's Shocking!

Why did the paramedics give their patient an electric shock?

The body can't survive for long without a steady supply of blood. So when the heart stops pumping, something has to be done—and quickly. A sudden electric shock gets rid of the bad vibrations that are causing the heart to stop working properly, and returns the heart to a normal beat.