

WEXFORD GENERAL: AMBULANCE CREW

Frontline

Saving lives is a rewarding but tough job, says Anthony Byrne. The Wexford paramedic talked to Conor Cullen

'WHEN we go to an emergency call somebody's life is in danger,' said Anthony Byrne of Wexford Ambulance Service.

Anthony is acting ambulance officer for Co Wexford and one of the paramedics working on the frontline for our health service.

The Wexford man has been with the Ambulance Service for over 10 years, passing a decade of service last May. However, he didn't come straight into it, having served in the Irish army first.

'I was in the army for over six years and I did a first aid course with the Civil Defence, which kind of piqued my interest in the medical side of things,' said Anthony.

'I had done two trips overseas and you'd be dealing with local people and children there, especially on checkpoints, and you'd be doing a few bits and pieces on the medical side of things, maybe putting on a bandage if someone fell over or that,' he said.

'I obviously had what it takes to do this job, but I never thought about it until I did that course with the Civil Defence and then I came into this job and I loved it - I haven't looked back since,' said Anthony.

Though he is currently acting ambulance officer in Co Wexford, Anthony is, clinically speaking, an advanced paramedic. He is also a tutor for the Ambulance Service and trains paramedics at the HSE South headquarters in Kilkenny. He is awaiting promotion to the role of training officer.

'Generally my week at the moment is between operations in Wexford and also I'm teaching paramedics for their up-skilling two days a week in Kilkenny,' he said.

'Then when I'm in Wexford or en route to or from Kilkenny I would also do calls, backing up an ambulance as an advanced paramedic, providing advanced life support,' said Anthony.

The life-threatening calls are termed Echo and Delta calls, all of which get an advanced paramedic if one is available. Paramedics are constantly up-skilling and constantly studying, through a combination of e-learning and face-to-face study.

'You need to be ahead of the game because every situation is different and our job entails that you have to be dynamic in your approach to every situation,' said Anthony.

However, he stresses that a paramedic is only as good as the team he is part of and their ability to work together. 'Even as an advanced paramedic I can only do so much and that's where the team comes in to help. It's teamwork in most cases - the best results generally come from teamwork,' he said.

Anthony says that even for experienced crew members some calls can be 'traumatic, to a certain degree'.

'In the main doing this job you don't see the trauma that other people would see, the normal civilian, you see the patient and you deal with the patient,' he said.



Anthony Byrne

'But regardless of how many years' service you have there's always something that's going to affect you somewhere. It might, for example, be a child that has been knocked down and you relate that to your own children. But you get on with the job and do as much as you can,' said Anthony.

'There is a lot of emotional support for personnel in the Ambulance Service too and we have our critical incident stress debriefings, which are always available,' he said.

Crews also sit down together after a serious call, whether the outcome was good or bad, and ask how they could improve on their response.

'We all do self-reflection after a call. We ask "should I have done this earlier?" or "should I have done that?", but the situation dictates a lot and that's why I said we're very dynamic in the way that we treat people - certain situations warrant certain

things,' said Anthony.

However, there's a lot more to the work of the Ambulance Service than just the dramatic call-outs that people are aware of.

'People ask about road traffic accidents and how bad they are, but that's only about 15 per cent of what we do. Eighty-five per cent of what we do is generally medical,' said Anthony.

'We've a lot of diverse skills in the Ambulance Service. One minute you may have someone who has broken a limb, the next minute you'll have a cardiac arrest or a stroke or we could have to do a medical transfer, taking someone from one hospital to another,' he said.

Anthony loves the job. 'Of all the emergency services it's probably the most rewarding I would say,' he said.

'You touch people's lives and they let you into their

lives at their most vulnerable point. You get a sense of achievement from saving somebody, whether it's just calming somebody down and bringing them to hospital for treatment,' he said.

Anthony said that the feeling of saving a life does not diminish over the years. 'Going on a call, the adrenaline buzz, we all get that, but achieving the goal of saving somebody's life, that's magical,' he said.

He pointed out that all the crews of Co Wexford Ambulance Service carry out this life-saving work every day. There are currently 40 paramedics working in the county.

They work 12-hour shifts, so that could be four a week, working out at an average of one day a week. Anthony says you never know what you will bring.

'When I come in at 8 a.m. in the morning I don't know if I am going on a call or not. We'll do a shift check on the ambulance, check the equipment's okay and get our drugs bags and equipment and stuff like that. You may have time off tea then, you may not,' he said.

'You just don't know what days will be busy at the behest of the public, really,' said Anthony, though he admits that the exception is