

The simple words that save lives

By William Park

20 September 2019

Lessons from “expert talkers” could make all the difference when helping a person in crisis.

In 1984, Dallas, Texas, a call to the emergency services went catastrophically wrong. An elderly woman had stopped breathing, or was struggling to breathe, in her home. Her son, clearly distressed, called 911. The conversation between the caller and the dispatcher quickly spiraled out of control.

Both parties appeared to argue for several minutes over the condition of the woman. The caller, increasingly exasperated, refused to give straight answers to many of the dispatcher’s questions. The dispatcher, equally frustrated, eventually hung up with a curt “kay, b’bye”. Thirteen minutes later paramedics were sent to the home where the woman in question was pronounced dead.

“He didn’t hear that the nurse’s questions were about helping the mother as best as possible,” says Tanya Stivers, a sociologist at the University of California Los Angeles, US. “The nurse was trying to establish some basic information about the mother. He found her questions antagonistic. Sometimes things that are transparent to one party, the nurse in this case, are not to another.”

At one point the dispatcher tried to speak to the elderly woman: “[You] can’t, she’s... seems like she’s incoherent,” said the caller. When asked why she is incoherent, he replied: “How the hell do I know?” When chastised for cursing he said: “Well I don’t care, ya stupid-ass questions you’re asking.”

The incident received extensive coverage in the Dallas newspapers and on national TV news at the time. Officials expressed bewilderment as to how an emergency call could have been conducted this way. The caller had given enough information – their address and that there was someone who had stopped breathing – to elicit a “Marine Corps response”, in the view of the Fire Surgeon for Salt Lake City Fire Department. This maximum response would include the dispatch of an ambulance, fire engine and paramedics.

After an investigation, the dispatcher in question was fired.

But how could an emergency call have gone so wrong?

Source: <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20190919-the-simple-words-that-save-lives>

Task 1| You're the dispatcher who got fired and you are planning to sue your employer for wrongful termination. Make a detailed (at least 7 events) timeline of the events described in the article so that it could be submitted as evidence in court.

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Task 1| You are the 911 caller whose mother died and you are planning to sue emergency services for damages. Make a detailed (at least 7 events) timeline of the events described in the article so that it could be submitted as evidence in court.