

BLOGGING? A GOOD IDEA?

My name is Zach Bieghler and I'm a paramedic in the State of Kansas. I have served with various EMS agencies in South Central Kansas as well as for an educational institution. I've been a paramedic since September of 2005 and in EMS since 2002. I've spent the last six years of my life dedicated to EMS, working as much as I could, between multiple EMS jobs to gain knowledge and experience. Life was good. I had recently become established enough to buy my first home in the town of which I served. I was taking various EMS courses to be a better instructor for my students of which I taught. Life as it seemed was on the right track I hoped and dreamed for. Unfortunately, that dream came to a sudden stop, which came by no one else's fault but my own.

In April of 2007 my EMS partner and I were called out for an inter-facility transfer. The patient had several medical complications, in addition to being severely obese. Several hours after the call and when the report was finished, I sat down at the computer, while on the clock mind you, and entered Myspace.com. There I started a "blog" which I wrote about the call I had just ran hours before. Out of respect for my previous employer, I'm not going to discuss what I had written in the blog, but to say ashamedly, it was vulgar and offensive and related to the patient's level of obesity.

I had written the blog for my friends to see only, most of which are in the EMS profession. I later discovered that I did not have settings adequate on Myspace.com to prevent the general public from viewing. I wrote the blog to share my experiences and to make them laugh. As a healthcare provider, we all must be empathetic and sympathetic towards all patients regardless of the situation. As I wrote this blog, my empathy for this patient was absent. I didn't think about the anger, humility, and mistrust that could have manifested by the patient towards me, my agency or my profession. Not to mention a legal proceeding that could have been initiated by the patient that could have damaged my agencies trust and reputation. This will present a tough, but extremely important lesson to learn as time goes by.

After I had written the blog, time went by as usual. As months went by I had actually forgot that I had written the blog. I had actually cared for this patient two more times since the blog for various reasons. As I continued caring for him I grew to like the patient. I remember one time as I entered his residence he greeted me by first name with a smile. You have developed a special bond with a patient when they remember you by name and you remember them. At this point, I would have deleted the blog from my site, but as I said, I had forgotten all about it.

In September of 2007, a co-worker reported the blog to my employer. This initiated a meeting between my Director, hospital Vice President and my agencies attorney. While participating in a mass casualty drill I was pulled away and escorted to the Vice President's office. I knew it had to be a significant matter to pull me away from such a training exercise. Completely oblivious as to what was going on, I found myself in the office with the Vice President of Operations and the Director of EMS. I was immediately confronted with the blog that I had written. I had a rush of emotions, the most

powering being sorrow for what I had done. I was instructed not to talk about it, delete all work related blogs immediately and was given a 30 day unpaid suspension. My Director also told me that he would more than likely be reporting the incident to the Kansas Board of EMS.

In a state of complete devastation I arrived home and immediately logged onto Myspace.com and deleted every blog I had ever written. I found out that evening that two of my co-workers had also been suspended 30 days without pay because of my personal blog and their return comments. I'm the author and they got suspended as well! I had never lived with such guilt in my life as I felt then. So guilt ridden in fact, that I lost 10 lbs over the next few days.

I continued to work for the educational institution during time I was suspended. After a week of my suspension, the Dean of Instruction at the educational institution received a letter accompanied by a copy of my blog. Now, this blog not only caused my problems at my EMS service, but my secondary job as well. This resulted in a very stern meeting between me and the EMS Program Director. The Program Director is my mentor and I had really let him down. Not only did I let him down, I let down the entire staff and students at the educational institution. The guilt and disappointment in me was starting to become unbearable. Serving a thirty day suspension from my career and my primary source of income took its toll. I had to completely drain all of my savings to stay afloat. All of this resulted because of my poor choice of judgment. I soon found that things were just starting.

I returned to work after my suspension and found myself working with those extremely disappointed in me. After a couple of days and a few talks with co-workers, things only improved by a little. I will never get that full respect back that I had prior to the incident and I wouldn't ask for it either. What I did was wrong and hard for anyone to forgive. Still guilt-ridden and disappointed beyond words, I found myself having difficulty coping with what I had done and fell into a deep depression.

February of 2008 rolled around; I was enrolled in an Instructor Coordinator class to further my education and passion to teach. I found that my Director did in fact report the incident to the Kansas Board of EMS. The Board's Investigations Committee was meeting in just days. I had contacted the Board and confirmed the news and was told that a decision would be made at the meeting later that week. The week passed slowly by as I waited in horror. Friday came and I contacted the Board office. I found that a decision had been made to revoke my Paramedic certification. My world was soon spiraling out of control.

As one could imagine, the process to revoke a license is not a quick and painless process. The process took months. Not knowing when my license would be revoked and trying to concentrate on my career was painstaking. One of the hardest things to complete was my Instructor Coordinator class, uncertain of my careers future path.

I had finally started to build my savings back up and was advised to seek an attorney. This was another financial hit from my original mistake. I hired an attorney to help me through the revocation process. A total of nine months passed since my original suspension. Nine months of guilt, anguish, disappointment and depression, I finally received a consent agreement. Given the options and willing to

accept my mistake and consequences of my action, I signed the consent agreement. This agreement listed several things, to summarize, I was being revoked for no less than 90 days for professional misconduct emphasizing on a possible violation of patient confidentiality.

Consequently, I resigned as a paramedic for the service I worked for and had to quit teaching, which is something I'm very passionate about. I had to take a job as a vendor merchandiser, stocking shelves in grocery stores. Working alone everyday gave me a lot of time to think about what I had really done and who I had disappointed. Having resigned from the EMS agency and not being able to teach, I roughly took a 60% pay cut. Once again, the financial burden, for my moment of poor judgment, continually hung over my head. During this time I relied very heavily on my family, friends and mentors. As I relied on them, they too suffered, feeling the ups and downs of the process. Also during this time I sought counseling for my actions from a mental health hospital. Having completed the counseling I learned more about empathy and it's importance. It instilled in me the importance of patient confidentiality as I found myself as a patient in a mental health hospital.

After barely struggling through my 90-day period it was time to try and get reinstated. I knew that it was possible that the Board could extend my revocation or worst yet revoke my MICT indefinitely. I soon found myself sitting in front of the Investigations Committee in Topeka, in a small room, crowded with people I didn't know. I felt alone as I really only knew three individuals there, two of which testified on my behalf. As I stood out in the hallway with the panel during deliberation, I felt sick with emotions. "What if they say no?" was all I could think of. I thought about how much effort and time (6 years) I had put into my career. For what? All for the chance to blog on Myspace.com?

The large group in the hallway filed back into the conference room as I took a seat back at the table in which I had testified at. The decision was made to reinstate my MICT! This was all I could ask for. There were two conditions that followed: 1) Write an article for the KEMSA Chronicle, which would also be published on the KSBEMS website, and 2) make myself available to any EMS agency across the State of Kansas to speak about what I had done and the consequences that followed.

Having listed the conditions stated, I want to emphasize that I'm not writing this article because I have to. I am writing this article to educate other EMS professionals. What I did was wrong and should never happen to anyone. I want people to learn from my mistake. I have heard several of my colleagues talk about calls that they had ran, some even in the same format as what I had wrote. We in EMS all have to know that "blogging" has consequences. Each and every bit of electronic postings must edify the profession, other technicians, ourselves and the patients we serve. I want my colleagues to think twice before saying or writing anything about the patients they care for. We have to be empathetic, put yourself in their shoes. Or as the hospital Vice President asked me in her office, "What if that patient was your mother, father, son or daughter"? As to the second condition listed, I would be more than happy to discuss my experience with your employees, co-workers or students. This is free of charge as required. You can schedule this by contacting me by email at emsmedic712@gmail.com.

I would like to thank the Kansas Board of EMS for giving me the privilege and opportunity to share my experience with others. I would also like to thank KEMSA for publishing this article. Also thanks to all my family, friends, colleagues and my counselor who has supported me through this trying experience.