

Learning from Exercise Amber

How do you train paramedics to care for people caught up in the most hazardous environments, including terrorist attacks?

Words: Dave Bull QAM, Head of Education, National Ambulance Resilience Unit

The National Ambulance Resilience Unit (NARU) ensures that the NHS ambulance service is effectively trained and fully equipped to provide the best frontline healthcare during the most complex incidents. A core part of my role is to train paramedics to become Hazardous Area Response Teams (HART) operatives. These are paramedics based in the 10 English ambulance trusts around the country, trained and skilled in saving lives in highly hazardous scenarios.

In the last year, these teams have been busier than ever with an average of more than 270 jobs per week nationally. These have included hazardous materials and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear incident deployments, inland water rescue, supporting firearms teams as well as high risk events.

An exercise in interoperability

Earlier in the summer, NARU put a group of newly trained operatives and other trained teams into one of the most challenging exercises to test this interoperable capability – a terrorist attack. 52 specialist hazardous area paramedics tackled a terrorist incident exercise involving firearms and explosions. It also involved a car, a train carriage, a bus and a coach teetering over the edge of a hill.

Exercise Amber was based on a scenario involving 120 casualties and was designed to test 24 paramedics' skills and abilities following six weeks of residential



Dave Bull is Head of Education at NARU.



Exercise Amber brought trainees and experienced HART staff together.

training to become HART operatives. In addition, eight previously trained HART staff took part alongside 20 Special Operations Response Teams (SORT) staff – who are now trained to support HART teams.

Using a command and control vehicle, a drone capable of thermal imaging and an air ambulance, Exercise Amber tested the complex interoperable response required by the ambulance service to a mass casualty incident. The scenario was a marauding terrorist attack and involved more than 340 people on site, including specialist casualty actors from Amputees in Action.

Challenging scenario

This was probably one of the most challenging and demanding scenarios that we can envisage. In this scenario, locations were ever changing as they would in real life with firearms police establishing 'safe zones' for paramedics to enter as the exercise progressed.

Our focus was to get the paramedics forward as quickly as possible, or in this case as the firearms police allow, and deliver lifesaving care. This includes immediate assessment, triaging, the use of decontamination equipment, drones to identify where patients are, air ambulances as well as ambulances to ferry patients to hospitals.

Aiming for realism

For this exercise, we used explosives and firearms experts who recreated the sounds of the terrorist attack, actors in full make-up as well as amputees for added realism. It's about immersing delegates and providing a little bit of shock, but overall, it's about getting it as close as possible to the real thing. Where mistakes are made – whether that's during command aspects or clinical treatment – we use this as vital learning.

The exercise was a huge success and really tested our newly trained paramedics to be HART operatives and the ability of our SORT teams to provide support. Ambulance services from around the country also took part.

Interoperability is important to ensure that HART teams from different ambulance services are able to work together, using the same equipment, safe systems of work, procedures and personal protective equipment. This is vital so that, in the terrible event of a real-life attack, as many lives as possible can be saved.

Sharing learning around the world

Our training has attracted international attention and we have been contacted by the FBI, Homeland Security as well as Australian authorities and other first responders from around the world.

Resilience is key to us at NARU and exercises such as this are vital to bolstering our skills. I'd like to thank all the NARU staff and other responders who played important roles in making this exercise happen and the work they do every day to ensure the ambulance service is ready for anything.

www.naru.org.uk

What is NARU?

The National Ambulance Resilience Unit (NARU) was established in 2011 as a central support unit for all UK ambulance services, to ensure the ambulance service can respond to a variety of hazardous and challenging incidents in the safest and most effective way possible.

How does NARU work?

A group of highly experienced ambulance service professionals, NARU's key role is to maintain and develop the high standards expected of the ambulance service's specialist interoperable capabilities so they are always high quality and fit for purpose.

Maintaining contract standards, ensuring safe systems of work, training and equipping specialist operational staff – such as HART and SORT teams – from each service so that they have the right tools, knowledge and attitude to be able to enter challenging and hazardous situations with the confidence and ability to save lives. Undertaking all of this while mitigating the risks to their own safety is key to NARU's work.