The guest columnist is a Friday feature on the Reflections page. A $25 honorarium is paid for articles selected for publication. Mail articles (500 to 1,000 words) to Guest Columnist, Reflections Page, Star-Telegram, 400 W. 7th St., Fort Worth, Texas 76102. Today’s guest columnist is Bryan Bledsoe, who is completing paramedic training at TCJC this summer.

By BRYAN E. BLEDSoE

If you were to suffer a massive heart attack right now, your chances of survival would be slim if you live Fort Worth. But your chances would be greatly enhanced if you lived in Dallas. Since death following a severe heart attack usually occurs within the first hour, the prompt summoning of skilled emergency medical help is essential. In other words your life could depend on the ambulance, the medical assistance that its crew provides, and the hospital emergency room to which you are taken.

At this time the city of Fort Worth is attempting to upgrade many of its services. It has upgraded the police department by hiring a new chief and implementing new programs. It has upgraded the fire department by improving equipment and training. But the city has repeatedly overlooked the emergency ambulance service. This is one of the most important services a city is responsible for. Why is it so far behind the times? The city has not improved the ambulance service to speak of since 1969.

Fort Worth is served by six emergency ambulances operating out of five stations. That is only one ambulance for each side of town with two centrally located. The smaller city of Austin has seven emergency ambulances operating out of six stations, while Dallas has 16 emergency ambulances operating out of its fire station.

Ambulance response times to the scene of an emergency runs anywhere from four to 16 minutes. The city requires a six-minute response time, but that is only an average and that is only on calls where the police dispatcher requests an ambulance. The majority of calls go to the ambulance dispatcher. There is no response time required by the city on these calls. Response times are very important because irreversible brain damage can occur four to six minutes after a cardiac arrest. The average response time in Austin is three to four minutes while the average response time in Dallas is 4.3 minutes.

Ambulance operators are only paid $2.30 to $2.60 an hour. These men work a shift that is 24 hours on duty followed by only 24 hours off duty. In other words they spend half of their lives at work. It is quite obvious why there is such a rapid employee turnover. This is almost unbelievable considering the responsibility and the danger involved in this work. The city of Austin pays its men from $860 to $1,050 a month. Their work shifts are 24 hours on duty followed by 48 hours off duty. This is the schedule also for the Fort Worth Fire Department. In Dallas the fire department operates the ambulance and the men receive firefighters’ wages.

In 1970 Fort Worth was one of the first cities in the state to require that the ambulances be of the modular or “milk truck” design. It was one of the first cities to require that the men operating them be registered Emergency Medical Technicians, but this is really nothing more than advanced first aid. Dallas, Houston, San Antonio and soon Austin are operating with advanced Emergency Medical Technicians or “paramedics.”

But Fort Worth is doing nothing more than giving first aid. Next Wednesday, 15 paramedics will graduate from Tarrant County Junior College. What will become of these men? Will the city use these people or will all of them leave the area looking for a place where they can work and practice their skills and begin to save lives that otherwise would be lost if they were not there?

The city, in my opinion, should do the following:

1. Take over the ambulance dispatching, (for emergency calls only). This way all emergency calls will come into a central location and response times on all calls will be improved. The dispatching can either be done by the police or the fire department dispatchers.

2. Overseer the working conditions of the men, the wages they make and the hours they work. There needs to be a line of communication between the men on the ambulance and the city.

3. Require another four ambulances which should be strategically placed throughout the city.

4. Require all of the ambulances to be equipped with two-way hospital radio communications. All data regarding the patients should be given to the hospital via this link.

5. Begin to plan and appropriate money to step up to the paramedic level of service. They should give a planned date for the start of this service.

6. Give the contractor a substantial subsidy increase. The amount of subsidy should be set according to the number of vehicles in operation. The contractor should make a daily report to the city manager on the status of the vehicles. When a vehicle is down, the company should lose that day’s subsidy for that vehicle if a reserve vehicle is not available.

7. Require that the ambulance bill be put on the patient’s emergency room charge. This way more insurance companies would cover the charges and a lot of the bills could be collected at the hospitals, thus saving a mailing and secretarial charge. The city should take legal action on all delinquent unpaid ambulance bills.

8. Look at the feasibility of operating the emergency ambulance service as a city agency if an agreement cannot be worked out with a private company. Something will have to be done about the ambulance problem here. But until something is done, don’t have a heart attack in Fort Worth.