

Rockland paramedics start trial run of drug used in ER

By [JANE LERNER](#)

Starting this weekend, several local paramedics will be carrying something new when called to emergencies.

It's a drug called "etomidate," and doctors and emergency service workers hope it will help save lives.

"This is going to significantly help us establish an airway and stabilize patients who are seriously injured," said Ray Florida, director of the Nanuet-based Rockland Paramedic Services.

The medication - normally used only by physicians in hospitals - is a fast-acting anesthetic that relaxes patients so they can undergo painful procedures, such as having a breathing tube put down their throats.

Rockland Paramedic Services is starting a six-month study to see if the drug can safely be used in the field.

The organization is among the first in the region to experiment with use of etomidate by trained paramedics outside of a hospital. Paramedics, along with emergency-room doctors from Nyack and Good Samaritan hospitals, will study its use in the field to see if it helps save lives.

Other local paramedics will be watching closely as well.

"I believe that if their study comes out favorably, use of etomidate will be written into protocols throughout the region," said Nelson Machado, quality improvement coordinator for the Hudson Valley Regional Emergency Medical Services Council, an agency that oversees paramedic services in six counties, including Rockland, Putnam and Orange.

At least once a week, paramedics treat a patient who has severe enough injuries that he or she cannot breathe, Florida said.

The study is starting at the beginning of the warm-weather months, when emergency service workers traditionally see an increase in injuries and accidents.

Rockland Paramedic responded to 21,419 calls in 2006, Florida said. He estimated that 3,500 or so involved patients who required intubation.

"Maintaining an airway is one of the most crucial things we do," said paramedic Michael E. Murphy, who is leading the study for Rockland Paramedic Services.

The paramedics have received special training on using the drug.

Unlike many powerful sedatives, etomidate does not paralyze a patient.

"It's a hypnotic drug," Machado said. "When you're on it, you don't know what is being done to you."

Murphy predicted it would be most useful in patients who had suffered serious head injuries.

That's because those patients often experience a reflex reaction that causes them to clench their jaws - making it impossible for emergency workers to open their mouths to insert breathing tubes.

Emergency-room physicians have long used etomidate to help stabilize trauma victims, said Dr. Michael Lippe, director of the emergency department at Good Samaritan Hospital.

If paramedics are unable to create an airway in a severely injured patient before getting to an emergency room, they have to use a mechanical bag to help the patient breathe. That's not the most effective way to treat patients with serious injuries, Lippe said.

He expects that patients treated with etomidate who have breathing tubes inserted will fare better once they arrive at the hospital for treatment.

"The bottom line is that it's a very safe drug," Lippe said. "And it makes patients more comfortable."

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Paramedics practice intubation.



[Angela Gaul/The Journal News](#)

Paramedic Stephen Cloeckler practices intubation as Rockland Paramedic Services Executive Director Ray Florida watches.