

State ambulance law: the worst

By SCOTT PENDLETON
Battalion Staff

Under Texas law, pickup trucks have been registered as ambulances.

Ambulance attendants are only required to have eight hours of Red Cross training.

Those two facts easily qualify the Texas ambulance law as one of the worst in the country.

Last revised in 1943, the Texas law sets no bounds on what type of vehicle may be used as an ambulance. It only requires the vehicle to carry a first aid kit when in service.

"You could register a wheelbarrow with a first aid kit," T.K. Williams said. Williams is the executive director of the Texas Association of Emergency Medical Technicians.

An EMT has 120 hours of emergency medical training. Since many EMTs work for ambulance services, the TAEMTs is vitally interested in the quality of ambulance legislation.

Regarding personnel, the law says that every ambulance "shall be accompanied by at least one person who has acquired theoretical or practical knowledge in first aid as prescribed and certified by the American Red Cross..."

This has been interpreted to mean that successful completion of an eight hour Red Cross course is sufficient qualification to be an ambulance attendant.

To emphasize the obsolescence of that training requirement, consider the fact that Texas requires cosmetologists to complete 1,500 hours of training and to pass a test in Austin before licensing them.

Requiring only one person to accompany the vehicle is another serious weakness in the law, since two people are needed: one to drive and one to attend the accident victim.

"You could register a wheelbarrow with a first aid kit" as an ambulance," T. K. Williams, of the Texas Association of Emergency Medical Technicians, said.

And if there are two people, health officials say, the driver should be a trained attendant as well. Both will be required to perform some treatments, such as splinting a leg.

Just because the state law is bad doesn't mean that ambulance services are uniformly bad across the state. The Dallas emergency medical service is considered one of the best in the country.

But almost all improvements in emergency medical service in Texas are made on a voluntary basis.

And while "the super-horrendous things" don't occur in Texas anymore, some ambulance services are still "load 'em and go" operations.

The Emergency Medical Services division of the Texas Department of Health should regulate ambulance services. But the ambulance law limits narrowly the EMS division's enforcement capabilities.

The EMS division has 30 field personnel in 10 district health offices who inspect ambulance vehicles and issue them two-year permits.

They check the equipment in the vehicle and make sure at least one attendant per vehicle is employed. First aid kits on ambulances must contain a variety of bandages, splints, and breathing aids—15 different kinds of items in all.

The inspectors must issue a permit for a vehicle, any vehicle, that has the required first aid kit and qualified attendant.

Harold Broadbent, of the EMS division headquarters in Austin, agreed that requiring the ambulance, rather than the company, to have a permit is like requiring nothing at all.

"Right now a company could get one vehicle permitted and could run three and we wouldn't know about it," Broadbent said.

The EMS division can do nothing during the two-year permit period to check up on the ambulance service, Broadbent said.

The only regular communications the EMS division gets from ambulance companies are ambulance activity reports. These forms are submitted for the EMS division's data response program.

The companies fill out a report on every emergency run they make, detailing the situation, symptoms, and treatment given.

These reports would seem to be a good way of checking on the quality of care the ambulance service or individual attendants give. In practice, this is never done.

Submission of the form is voluntary from areas that don't receive federal funding," Broadbent said.

If ambulance services feel we're checking on them, they'll stop participating," he said. The EMS division needs very much to get the information from the forms to aid planning.

In addition to inspecting and permitting ambulances, the EMS division administers an ambulance registry program and helps teach emergency medical courses.

To join the program, which also registers individual ambulance vehicles and not companies, participants must meet tougher requirements than in the state law.

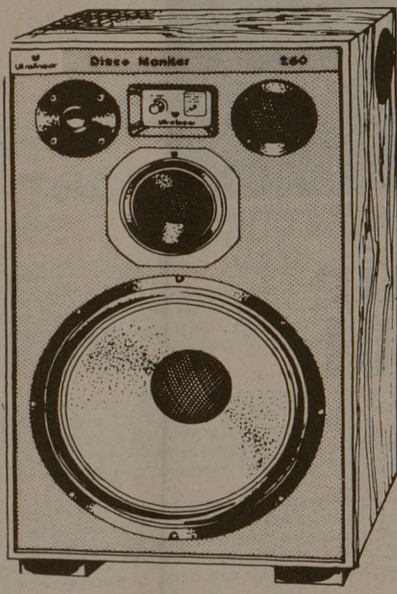
The ambulances are inspected yearly and must carry 12 additional items, including oxygen apparatus, an obstetrical kit, a poison kit, and a two-way radio.

Registered ambulances must be manned by two attendants who are at least Emergency Care Attendants. To become an ECA, students must complete 24 hours of training and be tested by the state health department.

The problem with the registry program is that it is voluntary. Of 1,685 emergency vehicles in Texas, merely 167 are registered. The training courses have been more successful. EMS division

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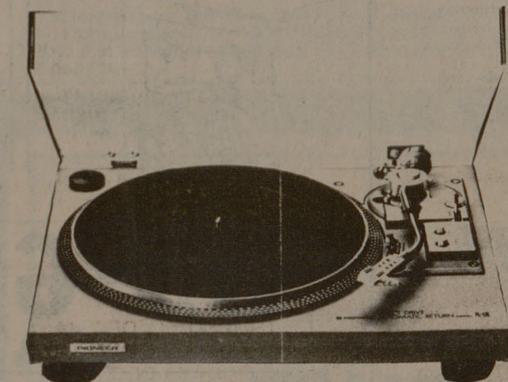
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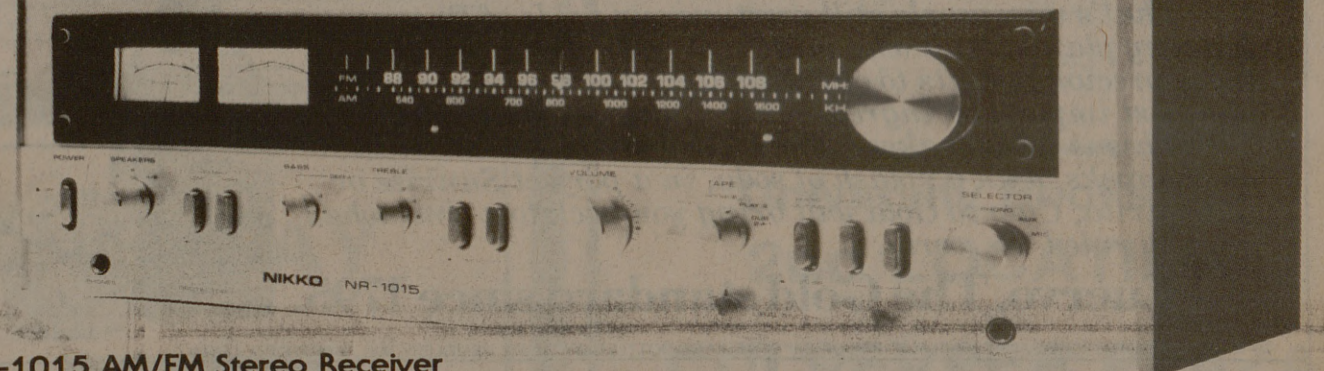
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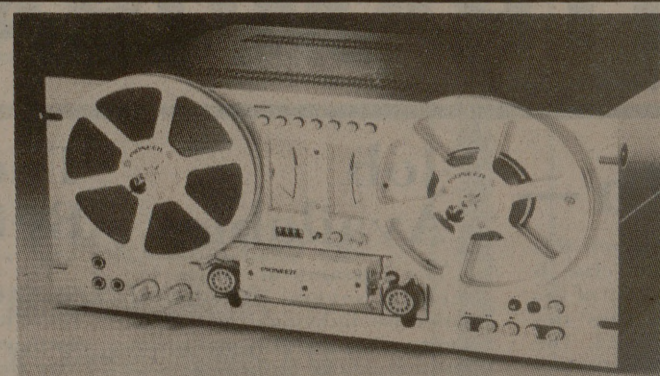
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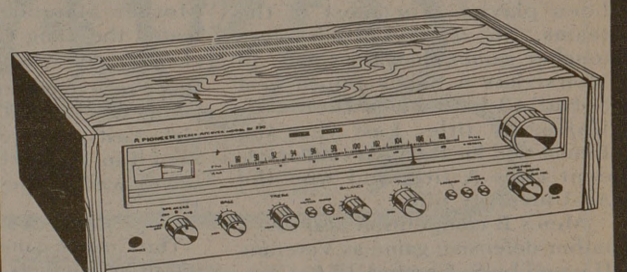
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Nothing short of a new ambulance law would revolutionize emergency medical service in Texas.

statistics show that the number of paramedics trained by the state has increased from zero in 1973 to 751 in 1978.

In the same period, the number of EMTs went from 1,231 to 7,129. The number of ECAs rose from 1,616 to 6,582.

When an ambulance company violates the state law, the EMS division can fine it \$100 upon conviction.

But to convict a permittee, the EMS division must file a formal complaint with the county attorney, who handles it from there.

"Several years ago we made a lot of formal complaints," Broadbent said. But he said the reaction of some county attorneys was "I don't want to file on old Joe."

The EMS division quit filing when it realized that it was costing the taxpayers more than the results were worth, Broadbent said.

"After that we pulled in our horns and came back to wait for a better law that we can administer," Broadbent said. The EMS division hasn't filed on anyone since then.

Nothing short of a new ambulance law would really revolutionize emergency medical service in Texas. Such a law would delight the EMS division.

"We'll do anything we can not to cause a stink so we can get new legislation through," Broadbent said, including "backstepping a little" from ambulance requirements.

The EMS division can't actually lobby for legislation. But Dr. James Atkins, a consultant to the Texas Department of Health, has prepared a model emergency medical services bill for consideration at the next legislative session.

Atkins' bill, 27 pages long, is a comprehensive plan for establishing an emergency medical service system. The bill corrects deficiencies of the existing three-page ambulance law.

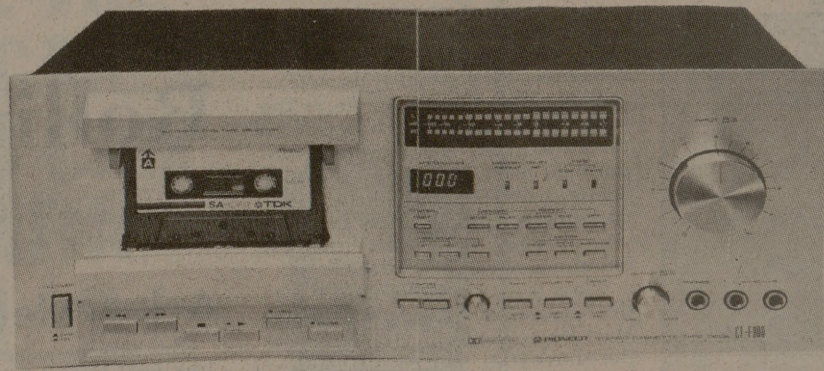
Whether or not the legislature would pass Atkins' bill is another matter. Attempts to pass similar legislation in the last two sessions succumbed to opposition from private ambulance services and rural legislators — the "stink" Broadbent referred to.

Ambulance services are already chronic money losers. As one EMT put it, "A private owner should go into an ambulance service as a tax write-off, because he won't make money."

Stricter legislation would only add to the financial burden of private companies. They might be forced to go out of business or to ask for a subsidy from the local government. Rural governments wouldn't be able to subsidize an ambulance service easily.

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