

To the RESCUE!

by Rachel Young

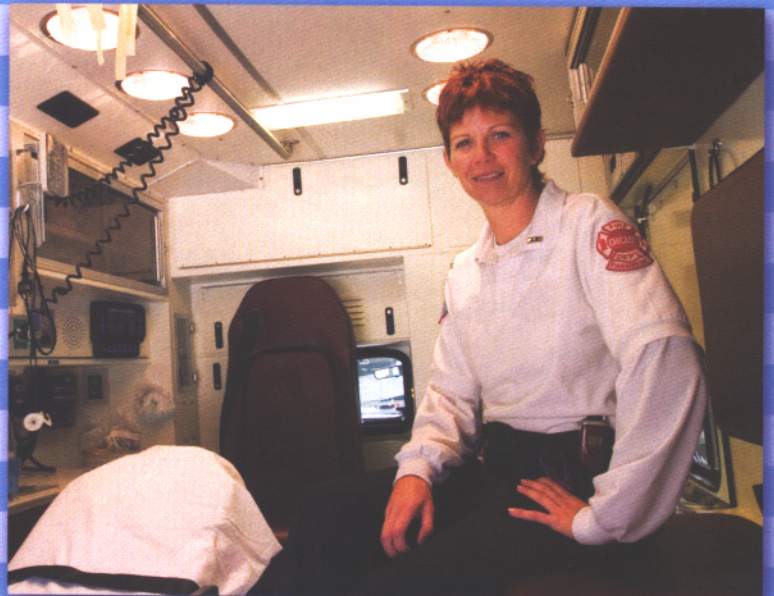


In seventh grade, Kerry Pakucko watched *Emergency!*, a TV show about paramedics, and knew she'd found her perfect job.

"I wanted to be a nurse but I couldn't imagine sitting in a hospital for 10 or 12 hours a day," she says. Like nurses, paramedics save lives and help sick and injured patients, but they are always on the go, driving the ambulance to wherever they are needed. Now Pakucko is a paramedic with the Chicago Fire Department. She's had the job for 20 years, and she still loves it.

When Pakucko learned about paramedics, the job was a new one. Just 50 years ago, an ambulance's only goal was to get sick people to the hospital quickly, so they could be treated by doctors and nurses. Drivers didn't have much medical training, and often there was no one to sit in the back of the ambulance and take care of the patient.

Then people realized that the sick and injured had a much better chance of surviving if they received expert care *before* they got to the hospital. So health-care workers called paramedics went through training in treating all sorts of medical emergencies to help stabilize a patient at home or on the way to the hospital. Now ambulances are like mini-emergency rooms on wheels, and paramedics



Paramedic Kerry Pakucko in her "office."

Ever Wonder... *What's Inside an Ambulance?* art by Jan Adkins

The **heart monitor** measures how fast the patient's heart is beating. Electrodes attached to the patient's chest feed information to a screen that shows the heart rate as an up-and-down line, called an EKG. A regular heart rate is anywhere from 60 to 100 beats every minute.

The **blood pressure monitor** uses a cuff worn around the patient's upper arm to measure blood pressure, which is shown on the gauge. Blood pressure levels show how hard the heart is working to pump blood through the body. High blood pressure means a patient's heart is pumping extra hard because of stress or heart disease.

If a patient can't get enough oxygen on her own, the paramedic attaches a tube to this **valve**. Oxygen from a tank stored in a cabinet on the side of the ambulance flows through the valve, through the tube, and into a mask worn by the patient.

Calls from the 911 dispatcher are received over this **radio telephone**. Paramedics use it to alert hospital staff of the patient's condition.

The **flashing lights and siren** on top of the cab can be seen and heard in traffic. As the ambulance speeds to a call, the driver flips a switch in the cab to turn them on. Some ambulances include a device that turns red traffic lights green.

This **laptop Toughbook computer** can take a beating. A hard case protects it from damaging falls, and a special keyboard lets spilled liquid drip through without harm. From here, paramedics can search a database of information on treating illnesses and injuries.

Lockable cabinets store first-aid supplies and medications to treat heart or breathing problems, diabetes, allergic reactions, and more.

Antibacterial gel is kept in a pump so paramedics can disinfect their hands quickly.

A special wheelchair, called a **stair chair**, is used to transport patients down stairs.

Each paramedic has a **jump bag**, or a quick response bag, to take when treating a patient. It contains a scaled-down set of what's carried in the ambulance.

A **pull-out ramp** makes it easy to wheel the stretcher aboard.

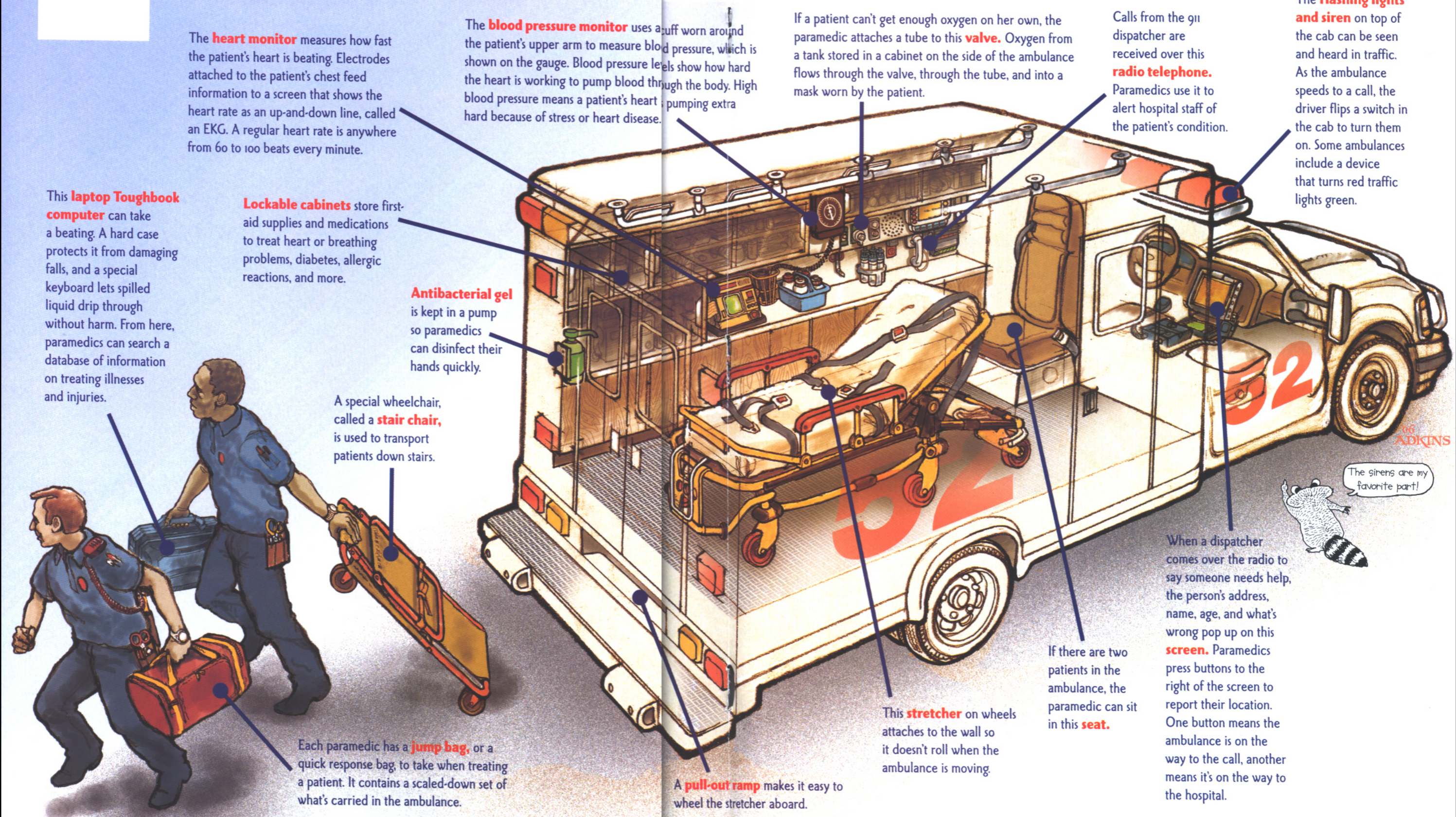
This **stretcher** on wheels attaches to the wall so it doesn't roll when the ambulance is moving.

If there are two patients in the ambulance, the paramedic can sit in this **seat**.

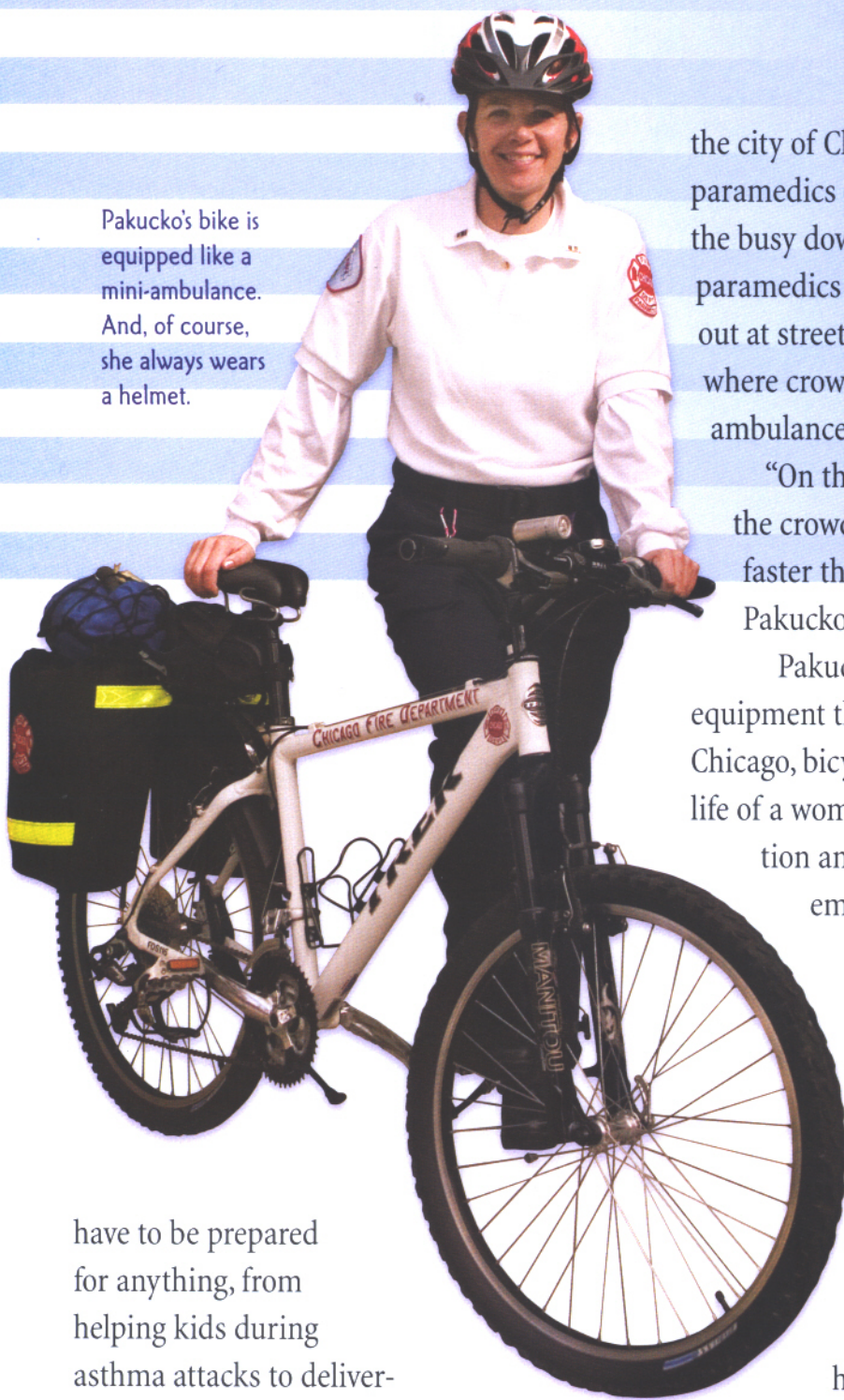
When a dispatcher comes over the radio to say someone needs help, the person's address, name, age, and what's wrong pop up on this **screen**. Paramedics press buttons to the right of the screen to report their location. One button means the ambulance is on the way to the call, another means it's on the way to the hospital.

The sirens are my favorite part!

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Pakucko's bike is equipped like a mini-ambulance. And, of course, she always wears a helmet.



have to be prepared for anything, from helping kids during asthma attacks to delivering babies—something Pakucko's done many times. And she never has to stay in one place for long, especially if she's on her bike.

That's right. Not only do paramedics drive in ambulances, they also ride bikes. Last year,

the city of Chicago began sending out paramedics on bicycles to help people in the busy downtown area. The bicycle paramedics patrol the lakefront and help out at street fairs and outdoor concerts, where crowds make it tough for an ambulance to reach sick people.

"On the bikes, we can zip through the crowd and get to the patient way faster than an ambulance could,"

Pakucko says.

Pakucko and her partner carry all the equipment they need in special saddlebags. In Chicago, bicycle paramedics have saved the life of a woman who had a bad allergic reaction and helped in all sorts of smaller emergencies.

Helping a sick person on a city sidewalk is all in a day's work for Pakucko. Recently, a man stopped Pakucko and her partner on their way back to the firehouse, where they rest between calls. The man was having chest pains, so Pakucko took his blood pressure, made him comfortable, and stayed with him until an ambulance arrived to take him to the hospital.

"We treat patients on the bus, at their house, at a restaurant, wherever they happen to be," she says, "until we've done all we can or the patient feels better."