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EDITORIAL

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Searching for paramedic academics: vital for our future, but nowhere to be seen!

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With paramedic education becoming established in Australian and New Zealand universities, the profession faces the challenge of preparing and recruiting well qualified and motivated paramedic academics.

Paramedic education is now an emerging part of the higher education landscape in Australia and New Zealand with 11 paramedic programs either established or under development. In the not too distant future, university programs will become the only means of entry for paramedics into most ambulance services. Recently adopted accreditation standards for university paramedic programs in Australia and New Zealand include a requirement that academics be recruited on the basis of their educational, clinical and research merit. This presents a significant challenge to universities, the profession and those paramedics who have ambitions to work as academics in the higher education sector.

Leaving the recruitment of paramedic academics to chance is a high risk strategy that threatens the future of the profession's academic standing and credibility. In order to be considered a profession in our own right, paramedics need to be the main educators of new entrants and to carry out research that develops the profession's knowledge base. While the contribution of other disciplines is valued, undue reliance on others for professional leadership limits the advancement of paramedics as a professional group. To better understand this argument and to see how it relates to the recruitment of paramedic academics it is necessary to consider the expectations that universities have of academics and the transition barriers that currently exist for paramedics. Most crucially, strategies need to be developed from the experiences of other health professions that will address the future needs of the profession.

Those paramedics who have made the transition from paramedic to academic have found it professionally stimulating and intrinsically rewarding. Many have experienced the joy of encouraging and supporting the next generation of paramedics in the classroom, while others have taken the opportunity to influence the future direction of the profession through research and policy development. Putting something back into the profession has been the common motivator for paramedic academics. However, making this transition can be a daunting prospect as many paramedics carry the burden of their limited formal qualifications from either industry-based schools or the vocational education system. Unfortunately, this has left a strong cultural barrier to university education amongst many paramedics that

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university paramedic students sometimes experience on clinical placements in ambulance services. Over many years, this cultural baggage has discouraged further education amongst many outstanding paramedics who could be guiding and mentoring the next generation of paramedics. Universities recognise the professional attributes of these advanced practitioners and make efforts to utilise their knowledge, skills and experience wherever possible through tutorials and guest lectures.

Only the most motivated and best advised paramedics overcame this cultural barrier and undertook university studies at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in related disciplines. These efforts sometimes led to academic careers after substantial roles in ambulance service management or training departments. The essential qualifications for appointment as a paramedic academic are a higher degree related to health science, experience as a clinician in an emergency health setting, and a demonstrated ability to teach across a range of subject areas that may include communication, pathophysiology, sociology, research methods and operational management.

For most academic positions it is also desirable to have a relevant record of research activity, experience in the education of health professionals and curriculum development. Without a research higher degree like a Doctor of Philosophy or a strong record of research and publication, paramedics are unlikely to be appointed to senior academic positions that attract the remuneration and status that experienced paramedics and clinical educators currently expect within ambulance services. Universities are unlikely to lower their academic standards to remove this barrier to the appointment of senior paramedics without formal qualifications to senior academic posts.

These limitations and expectations challenge us to develop strategies that will encourage and support the potential paramedic academics of the future. A first step should be the establishment of an environment in which practicing paramedics are able to participate in research activities and publish their findings. Opportunities should also be created for suitably qualified paramedics to spend time in an academic environment as part of their professional development. Ambulance authorities and universities could work together to facilitate appointments or secondments to academic positions at key stages of a paramedic's professional development.

Some of the other strategies that individual ambulance authorities currently use to break down the barriers between ambulance services and universities include encouraging their staff to undertake higher degrees, offering secondment and research opportunities at universities with paramedic programs, and making it easier for existing academics to undertake continuing clinical practice through joint appointments and casual employment. These initiatives need to be more widespread if sufficient numbers of paramedic academics are to be encouraged and developed for the future.

With these support strategies in place, paramedics who wish to enter academia will be able to position themselves to take up the opportunities that will become available in university paramedic programs throughout Australia and New Zealand. Apart from obtaining formal qualifications, they can develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes through tutoring, assessing and marking for universities, mentoring undergraduate students on clinical placements, getting involved in research projects, and continuing to undertake professional development with ambulance authorities and professional bodies.

Following the appointment or secondment of paramedics, universities have a responsibility to ensure that these new academics understand the university environment and are able to cope with the demands that are placed on them. Amongst the challenges that new academics face are connecting with students who are yet to fully commit to being paramedics, dealing with the myriad of administrative requirements, and balancing their teaching, research and professional activities. Universities address these issues through mentoring, the provision of tertiary teaching courses, encouraging new academics to undertake research degrees through staff scholarships, and seed funding for small research projects. Despite these support mechanisms new paramedic academics can feel under pressure to develop their teaching while undertaking and publishing their research in highly regarded journals. As members of an emerging discipline with few peer-reviewed journals established within the field and limited opportunities to apply for research funding from established granting bodies, these challenges can be overwhelming without adequate support.

It is clear that the community would benefit greatly from a healthy pool of paramedics who want to contribute to the future of their discipline through educational, research and professional activities as academics. The identified barriers to this and the suggested strategies highlight the need for universities, ambulance authorities and the profession to work together on ways to better develop and encourage paramedic academics.