Profile

DR. PETER O'MEARA
AMBULANCE TO ACADEMIA AND BACK AGAIN
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Editor

In February 2004, Dr. Peter O'Meara will take up the position of Associate Professor in the School of Public Health at Charles Sturt University. This school includes the university's academic programs in prehospital health care, health service management and emergency management.

Peter's appointment follows a long journey through ambulance services, and several professional and academic hurdles. The position closely matches Peter's academic skills and interests in rural health, health services research, and prehospital care. The appointment of an academic with a strong ambulance background is a clear acknowledgement that prehospital care is now being recognised as a profession in its own right.

Peter says that he hopes that his appointment will encourage other ambulance paramedics and managers who are pursuing further study or research to persist. Overcoming the views of sceptical colleagues and often limited organisational support has been all too common in the past. With recent changes in ambulance service culture, it should now be a little easier for those ambulance professionals undertaking post-graduate studies.

Peter will bring to his new position academic strengths and interests in health policy, systems theory and ambulance service delivery. These interests were brought together in his PhD in the School of Public Health and Community Medicine at the University of New South Wales. His thesis was titled: researching "Ambulance service delivery models in rural Victoria." Peter was one of the first Australian ambulance professionals to be awarded a PhD. Details of his and other related theses can be found at <http://adt.caul.edu.au/>.

From 1973 until 1997 Peter worked in Victorian ambulance services, firstly in Shepparton as a Cadet, Ambulance Officer and Station Officer, then in Mildura as a Senior Station Officer (operations) and Area Superintendent, and finally in Gippsland as a District Superintendent and General Manager of Corporate Services. In these roles he came face-to-face with the challenge of providing services to rural and remote communities with limited resources and infrastructure.

During his training in Shepparton, he became interested in the operational development and management of ambulance services. One result of this was that he joined the newly established Institute of Ambulance Officers (Australia). One of the highlights of this was flying to Brisbane with his Superintendent, the late Wally Thomas, for an early ambulance conference in a single-engine aircraft. Unfortunately, by the time they negotiated heavy fog on route, the conference was all but over. Peter also became actively involved in the newly formed Ambulance Employees' Association firstly at a local level and later as a member of the State Council. This afforded him the opportunity to meet and work with a broad range of union officials and senior ambulance managers from throughout Victoria.

Peter embarked on his academic path after qualifying as an ambulance officer in late-1975. In the beginning, he aimed to obtain his Higher School Certificate at night school and then to extend his general education through studies at Deakin University as an off-campus student. He studied journalism and international relations at Deakin. At about this time in the early-1980s, Peter moved into a supervisory position and the training of ambulance managers was making the transition from the in-house courses to the higher education sector. The courses that were recommended at that time were mainly off-campus diplomas and degrees in management at Colleges of Advanced Education. Mr Peter Newbold, then Director of the Ambulance Officers' Training Centre, suggested to Peter that he should apply to enter the highly prestigious Bachelor of Health Administration course at the University of New South Wales. This proved to be sound advice and propelled Peter into a Senior Station Officer role in Mildura where he worked with Superintendent Gerry Thomas. During the course of his studies over the next six years Peter was promoted to Area Superintendent in the North Western Region and then to District Superintendent in East Gippsland.

Coming into a senior management role in the early 1990s was very difficult as the State government was embracing economic rationalism as its dominant management philosophy. Even before the election of the Kennett Liberal Government in 1992, managers were pre-occupied with 'cost-cutting' and improving efficiency. Much to the chagrin of Peter and other Superintendents there was little scope to improve services.

The election of the new Kennett Government ushered in a much more aggressive and confrontational management environment in which the industrial relations climate deteriorated further with concepts of teamwork and co-operation disappearing. The financial position of the then regional services also become dire, and moves were taken to rationalise the regions into larger organisations. This ultimately led to the formation of Rural Ambulance Victoria alongside the Melbourne Metropolitan Ambulance Service in 1999. Peter spent much of this time rationalising services and facilitating redundancies for staff. In the end, this included his own redundancy in early 1997.

On the positive side of the ledger, these experiences kindled in Peter an interest in the formation and implementation of health policy. Maybe foreseeing his own professional demise, Peter had returned to Deakin University in 1994 to undertake post-graduate studies in public policy. He graduated in 1998 with a Master of Public Policy, a year after leaving the ambulance service.

For the past six to seven years Peter has worked in the Centre for Rural Health which has since been established as the [School of Rural Health](#) within the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences at Monash University. During this time, he has undertaken a number of roles in the rural health area. In the first instance, he was a project officer undertaking a feasibility study for the establishment of an after-hours medical service following the planned closure of the Moe campus of Latrobe Regional Hospital. This service is now well established and Peter continues to work with the 'Moe after-hours Medical Service' on aspects of their service. At the Centre for Rural Health, Peter also

carried out project work relating to the training of general practitioners and assisted in the publication of annual reports and bulletins. He then had two years as Resources Manager of the Centre.

During the past three years Peter has worked in academic positions in the School of Rural Health, Monash University. One of his rural health responsibilities has been the co-ordination of the Ambulance Service Medical Officer role, provided by the School to Rural Ambulance Victoria (RAV) in Gippsland, and more recently extended to the Mallee district of Northern Victoria. This program started while Peter was a General Manager of Corporate Services in the South Eastern Region. It is designed to provide support and advice in the management of clinical operations and to contribute to clinical policies and strategies of Rural Ambulance Victoria. Of more long term importance, the program has provided a framework for the development of a closer and more integrated relationship between rural ambulance services and other rural health services and professionals.

Peter's most significant research projects in the School have been those related to urgent care models. These projects have taken a multidisciplinary approach to the investigation of the urgent care needs of Victorian rural towns; they have conceptually linked rural ambulance services, other health and emergency services, and the community. In the latter part of the urgent care project, Peter and the other team members worked closely with Rural Ambulance Victoria to improve service delivery through the development of innovative models of practice.

In addition to his research role, Dr O'Meara has been a subject advisor in the Schools Post-graduate Program, where he has taught Research Methods, Rural Health Management and Rural Health Politics and Policies. More recently he has taught Rural Health Systems in the Bachelor of Rural Health Practice in the School of Nursing, and been a tutor in a number of programs within the new Monash undergraduate medical course.

As a consequence of his forced career change, Peter realised that he would have to 'reinvent' himself. He chose to do this through the pursuit of a research degree and the building a research and publication record through research grants and peer-reviewed publications. Achievement of these personal and professional goals would have been impossible without the support and encouragement his academic colleagues at the School of Rural Health, and the flexibility of the University of New South Wales which allowed him to pursue his studies with very little face-to-face contact over the four years of his candidature.

Dr O'Meara also maintained his personal and professional links with his former ambulance service colleagues who offered practical support during his PhD and for a number of other research and educational activities he was involved in. Apart from graduating with a Doctorate in December 2002, these projects and activities have resulted in a number of international publications and presentations at international conferences in Sydney, Wellington in New Zealand and Vancouver in Canada. The resulting national and international profile helped Dr O'Meara to realise his ambitions and to be offered an Associate Professor position within his own discipline of pre-hospital care.

From his perspective, Peter sees a number of major challenges for pre-hospital researchers and educators in the future. Included amongst these is the need for the more active participation of researchers with professional backgrounds within ambulance services. Over-reliance on medical and nursing leadership reflects the lack of a healthy research culture within Australian ambulance services. To do this ambulance paramedics need to be educated in basic research methods as part of their early training. In time, a smaller number of interested ambulance professionals will develop the skills to engage in independent ambulance research.