Commentary

The Australasian College of Paramedic Practitioners: A specialist college for paramedics with primary healthcare skills

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Abstract

This commentary presents the aims of The Australasian College of Paramedic Practitioners (ACPP) and its function and purpose for Australasian paramedics.

Keywords:

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Introduction

The Australasian College of Paramedic Practitioners (ACPP) was created for experienced and registered paramedics who have an interest in primary healthcare. The primary aim of the ACPP is to create a pathway for these specialist paramedics to work within all areas of the Australian healthcare system. The ACPP envisions paramedics will be practising collaborative healthcare, in a range of multidisciplinary settings.

The ACPP see a role for paramedics not only in traditional ambulance services but also in clinics such as community health and Aboriginal community controlled health services, general practice clinics and hospitals. Along with emergency and unscheduled care, rural and remote areas of Australia would particularly benefit from having paramedics with primary healthcare skills.

Paramedicine is a rapidly evolving field, with currently more than 19,000 registered paramedics in Australia (1). Most paramedics are now tertiary qualified and hold an accredited baccalaureate or higher degree (2). Australian paramedics are now providing healthcare that 20 years ago was the domain of emergency medicine physicians (3).

Traditionally, paramedics have provided acute, out-of-hospital healthcare and transport of patients to an emergency department in a hospital. This 'emergency' model of care has characterised paramedicine and that role is widely accepted by the community, and other health professionals, as where paramedics fit in the healthcare system. The reality is that patient needs are changing. With a growing and ageing population, paramedics are increasingly encountering patients with primary healthcare needs (4-6). Greater engagement in primary healthcare is the next clinical evolution for paramedicine.

The addition of primary healthcare skills to paramedicine is occurring now. Several Australian jurisdictions are already developing ambulance workforce models designed to better manage patients with primary healthcare needs. The exact number of statutory ambulance paramedics working in these roles is not known. There are however, about 5000 Australian paramedics working in the private sector (6). Many of these paramedics are practising a wide range of both emergency and primary healthcare skills (7).

This evolution of primary healthcare roles within paramedicine is occurring within Australian jurisdictional ambulance services and the private sector. However, the emergence of this new health professional is not occurring in planned manner and lacks a national approach.

Nationally there are no agreed practice frameworks or scope of practice for these paramedics. Learning outcomes from educational programs, which are mostly in-house, vary

significantly. Unless a national approach is taken, paramedics will continue to be an underutilised and a largely forgotten workforce within the broader healthcare system (6-8).

Statutory ambulance services focus on the provision of out-of-hospital care within their state or territory jurisdiction. Private healthcare providers currently employing paramedics focus on contractual service delivery while the healthcare system at large simply does not employ these highly trained professionals. The integration of paramedics into the broader healthcare system is unlikely to occur without the creation of an independent body that advocates at a national level, for these emerging paramedic practice roles. Meaningful engagement with decision makers and members of the wider health workforce is required to progress this objective.

The ACPP was established for this purpose, and after developing its policy focus, was registered in December 2019. The ACPP recognises that paramedics could be used more broadly within the entire Australian healthcare system and intends to advocate for an expanded paramedic role in the Australian healthcare workforce. This is not something radical, but evolutionary.

The ACPP currently has four strategic objectives:

1. Embed paramedics with primary healthcare skills into Australian healthcare system(s)
2. Develop nationally consistent standards, for paramedics with primary healthcare skills
3. Conduct research into primary healthcare paramedicine
4. Strengthen and grow the ACPP.

Implementation of these strategic objectives will not be easy or quick. The creation of a new role in a very large and complex health system will be a challenge. Agreement will need to be reached by both state and federal governments and healthcare providers.

Many barriers to reform will need to be overcome, such as gaining access to prescribing, pathology and radiology services and access to certain Medicare Benefits Scheme item numbers to allow fee for service. Organisations and existing medical colleges may feel threatened.

The ACPP recognises the complexity of enabling paramedics into the wider healthcare system. It also recognises that health systems need innovation and we look forward to being part of the solution in better meeting the healthcare needs of our communities.

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