

VIC Health Workforce Strategy Submission

Paramedics are key to a sustainable health workforce strategy

The Australasian College of Paramedicine (the College) welcomes the opportunity to contribute solutions and recommendations to the Victorian Government Health Workforce Strategy.

The College is the peak professional body representing and supporting paramedics and student paramedics across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand since 1973. The College champions the role of paramedics in emergency, urgent and primary care, driving a connected, multidisciplinary approach to high-quality healthcare in all communities.

The College is future-focused and committed to enhancing patient-centred care through sustainable initiatives. We acknowledge the health workforce is large, complex and multi-disciplinary; our proposed solutions and ideas address the professional health settings where paramedics are uniquely skilled and can make the greatest impact.

Victoria requires a health workforce plan to overcome the shortage of workers needed to deliver care. Healthcare workers have been exposed to a challenging workplace during COVID-19 which has led to an increase in resignations. There is also a growing demand for fractional employment and a variety of employment across multiple employers which is impacting the available workforce and putting added pressure on the health system.

The College recommends a comprehensive and holistic health workforce plan for government to create and implement initiatives to attract and retain healthcare workers, particularly in rural and regional areas; investment in training to boost capability; a healthcare worker wellbeing strategy, and; the implementation of innovative models of care.

The health system must put the patient at the centre, and a workforce strategy needs to deliver the best care for the patient. A "whole health workforce" approach would be required to upgrade the current healthcare system, focusing on improvements for healthcare workers in the areas of supply, capability, wellbeing, and innovation. The College recommends several solutions to address paramedicine workforce issues in those areas.

Supply and sustainability

Workforce shortages across all areas of health are contributing to system pressure, reduced healthcare professional wellbeing and poor patient outcomes. When staffing levels and patient loads are balanced, healthcare professionals will feel confident to provide the best level of care to patients. This must be the focus of any health workforce strategy; creating an environment that supports the health worker to deliver quality patient care. While most healthcare professionals understand the demanding work environment they are entering, more must be done to make it as rewarding as possible to ensure health workers feel valued and are making a positive contribution.

The Victorian Government should increase health workforce development opportunities and build sustainable training pathways for advanced registered healthcare providers. This would support quality, patient-centred care and build capacity in existing and new healthcare settings across metropolitan and regional areas.

The College supports the growth of ambulance services and the use of paramedics to fill relevant new positions. However, with paramedics becoming increasingly interested in professional pathways outside of emergency services, a lack of flexibility offered in the sector, and the emotional cost of a demanding work culture, delivering a trained and dedicated workforce without culture, work structure and legislative changes presents challenges for the future.

A key aspect of "supply" is keeping the existing healthcare workforce within the health system. Paramedics have limited opportunities outside of jurisdictional ambulance services, so expanding opportunities and career pathways

for paramedics to work across the health system in emergency, urgent and primary care will retain more paramedics in the health system, and for longer.

Recommendations to enhance the supply of paramedics:

1. Provide greater career, development and work opportunities for paramedics to work across the health system, not just in the emergency ambulance environment, such as in urgent care clinics and primary health care
2. Provide greater flexibility through fractional working (i.e. part time roles) and working across the health system in multiple practice areas for one or multiple employers (i.e. emergency ambulance, primary care, urgent care etc)
3. Attract and recruit experienced paramedics who have taken opportunities to work internationally (i.e. on last count there were 2200 Australian paramedics on the UK register)
4. Support conjoint or partnerships appointments across clinical, management, academia, and research domains
5. Undertake health system wide assessment of paramedicine workforce requirements and work with the university sector to ensure appropriate numbers of suitably educated paramedics graduate to meet government needs, taking into consideration the growth in private providers and their workforce needs
6. Enabling postgraduate entry to practice pathways, especially from other health professions
7. Accredit private medical services to provide workforce to the health system at times of overload as surge capacity

Boosting capability

Across the health system we are seeing the detrimental impact of the health worker shortage leading to reduced access to and availability of timely, high-quality healthcare for the community. Enhancing the scope of practice and building on the capabilities of our existing health workforce provides great flexibility and transferability across health services. Healthcare is a growing and varied sector where healthcare workers could take their careers in multiple directions through training, development, and exposure to new or specialist settings. Providing opportunities for professional development and upskilling increases high-quality, patient-centred care in all healthcare settings.

Paramedics are educated and experienced in providing emergency and urgent care, as well as low-acuity healthcare to people in diverse settings. Paramedics attend a wide variety of patient presentations, ranging from critical and traumatic injury to chronic, complex medical syndromes in aged care facilities, mental health conditions, substance use disorders, and palliative and end-of-life care.

Since the introduction of paramedic registration, paramedics are increasingly working across various healthcare settings, not just within jurisdictional ambulance services. Paramedics are used in various healthcare models internationally and across Australia. These models of care utilise the paramedic workforce, which is uniquely placed to support existing health infrastructure, to deliver responsive, high-quality, and affordable primary and community healthcare services.

Recommendations to enhance the capability of paramedics:

1. Undergraduate paramedic education and paramedic scope of practice to increase urgent and primary care focus to create a broader capability to deliver across the health system
2. Formal postgraduate education for specialist practice such as MICA and community paramedics. Note: The College recommends postgraduate diploma qualifications for specialist practice
3. Growth of advanced practice models (above specialist practice) to utilise the paramedic capability at a higher level, like nurse practitioners

4. Upskilling of paramedics through ongoing professional development requirements, led by the profession, above the minimum requirements of AHPRA to raise clinical standards and practice to deliver higher quality patient care
5. Reduce obstacles (i.e. legislative, employment, funding) restricting paramedics from working to the full scope of their practice

Wellbeing

The literature describing the current experiences and mental health of all healthcare workers is scathing in respect to fatigue, anxiety, stress and being overwhelmed.^{1,2} Taking care of the mental health of healthcare workers improves their ability to fully serve their patients. In addition, burnout affects other members of the healthcare workforce.

To be an employer of choice the Victorian Health Services should focus on developing innovative ways to address fatigue, rostering/overtime, rest breaks, and work-life balance. While these factors impact healthcare workers differently, flexibility of hours, locations and employers, providing a valuable service, contributing to the health outcomes of others, feeling valued and supported in your workplace, being part of a great team, and opportunity to grow and develop, are central.

Structural changes to government policies, workplace culture and workforce legislation would enable diverse employment opportunities for paramedics across the whole of health. Benefits of making this move include:

- Greater career pathways will support the mental health and wellbeing for paramedics across the entire journey of their working lives
- Paramedics can enjoy a diverse range of career opportunities and choices of employer, much like other health professions already do
- Relieve the stress of work-life balance where paramedics make choices about their career progression/pathway, creating other opportunities to work meaningfully in all parts of the health system
- Retain individuals within the health system by offering flexibility and movement within and across roles

Recommendations to enhance the wellbeing of paramedics:

1. Ensure paramedic representation is part of the workplace decision-making process. This will contribute to a culture that values expertise and knowledge
2. Enhance alternative pathways into and across healthcare professions; encourage exploration among health profession entrants interested in different specialisations, with the support of mentorship, continuous professional development, and opportunities for conjoint careers

Innovation

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw innovation in healthcare technology, delivery, and enhanced capacity across the health system. The workforce strategy should look to build on the innovation that has already begun, focusing on technological solutions and capability enhancements in existing workforces to provide faster, higher-quality health care service across our communities. By breaking down the tertiary/specialised, metropolitan-centric model and building innovative, multidisciplinary models of care across communities, access to healthcare will be improved

¹ Phillips WJ, Cocks BF, Manthey C. Ambulance ramping predicts poor mental health of paramedics. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, & Policy*. 2022; Publish ahead of print.

² Taking ACEM. Access Block Online 2022 [Available from: <https://acem.org.au/Content-Sources/Advancing-Emergency-Medicine/Better-Outcomes-for-Patients/Access-Block>].

for our patients, and our healthcare workforce will be exposed to greater flexibility, increased job satisfaction, and an attainable work-life balance.

Paramedics have been increasingly established in primary care in several countries in the past decade with benefits that include reduced GP workload, better access to health assessment and care for patients, and career development within the health system. Current funding models, government policy and legislation impede the ability for health services to employ registered paramedics. Community Paramedicine is an innovative model that would improve outcomes, build community relationships, and reduce healthcare disparities. Providing patients options for multidisciplinary home care would steer them away from Emergency Department environments.^{3,4}

Recommendations to enhance the health care through innovation:

1. Utilise the capability of Community Paramedics and Extended Care Paramedics both within and outside of jurisdictional ambulance services to deliver healthcare across urgent, primary and aged care settings, this includes but is not limited to Urgent Care Clinics, Emergency Departments, mental health, primary and community health, hospital in the home programs and palliative care
2. Recognise the potential for paramedics to work across the whole health system, as has been proven to be possible during the pandemic (i.e. vaccination administration), but importantly to deliver more care to the community in the community rather than via the hospital system
3. Utilise paramedics in regional, rural and remote areas across the health service, providing the emergency response ambulance service, supporting volunteer ambulance officers, and working with local GPs, health clinics, and country hospitals
4. Pilot new and innovative models of care, with multidisciplinary teams across various settings (i.e. mental health care teams of a paramedic and nurse as utilised in the UK, and paramedics in GP clinics in Canada and Scotland) and collect evidence for the viability and success of these models to support the delivery of high-quality care to the community

Conclusion

Legislation and government policies will need to change to support the expanded role of paramedics across the broader health system. While this will take some time, it is a medium-term solution that will contribute to addressing health workforce challenges across Victoria and ensure the Victorian health system is a place where people want to work.

The College is well positioned to play a key role in further stakeholder engagement and would work closely with the government on its strategy for recovery and long-term sustainability of a happy, healthy, and safe healthcare workforce in Victoria. Work is underway by the College in other states and federally on the future scope and future roles in paramedicine; hosting forums and nurturing relationships with government, peak organisations, key stakeholders, and practicing paramedics to do so. We are committed to the training and development of paramedics; learning from other medical colleges and international paramedicine models, we are engaged federally to develop a framework for credentialing and scoping across the profession.

We look forward to any opportunity to expand upon this submission and discuss further.

³ Gurung A, Rome M, Clark S, Hocking J, Dhollande S, Broadbent M. The enigma: Decision-making to transfer residents to the emergency department; communication and care delivery between emergency department staff and residential aged care facilities' nurses. *Australasian Journal on Ageing*. 2022;00:1-8.

⁴ Clarkson K. pulsara [Internet]. Online: pulsara. 2021. [cited 2022]. Available from: <https://www.pulsara.com/blog/study-community-paramedicine-is-growing-in-impact-and-potential>.