

Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

About us

The College is the peak professional body representing and supporting over 10,000 paramedics and student paramedics across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The College is future-focused and brings together paramedics from across Australasia to represent, advocate and promote the unique capabilities of paramedic profession to be more broadly utilised in innovative, patient-centred solutions based on evidence.

The Australasian College of Paramedicine (the College) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the consultation on Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response. The College recognises that evolving health, sustainability and climate movements are bringing attention to the growing connections between public health and climate change and the College strongly support collaboration between health professions and decision-makers is key to improving preparedness, responsiveness and resilience for future health and environmental impacts.

Preparedness

In the wake of COVID-19, the College supports the need for all health professionals, working across emergency and primary care, to be part of building a better framework of preparedness, not just those professions who work in emergency response like paramedics. While paramedics are emergency responders and adhere to existing crisis emergency frameworks across each state and territory, they also work closely with urgent and primary health professions outside of a crisis situations and must be involved in preparedness strategic planning such as: health literacy campaigns for communities and primary care providers to be better prepared in a crisis; implementing learned opportunities from previous crises; supporting governments to amend policy and legislation to ensure health-giving barriers do not impede crisis responsiveness, and; ongoing training in emergency, urgent and primary care crisis response.

In addition to the wide consultation across Australia, we recommend also looking at international strategies such as those listed below:

BRACE: In the USA, the Building Resilience Against Climate Effects (BRACE) framework plans for the health impacts of climate change in conjunction with existing healthcare models. This could inform and support equitable distribution of care across the metro, regional, rural and remote areas of Australia which is both accessible and sustainable.

The Climate Policy Council: Sweden's Climate Act and Climate Policy Framework is broken up into three parts; long-term goals, a planning and monitoring system, and a climate policy council. This council holds the government accountable to climate commitments by evaluating and reviewing government policies and progress. Enacting something similar in Australia could support the uptake of climate change policies and assist in identifying and then changing restrictive legislation preventing emission reduction.

Responsiveness

Climate change will impact air quality, sanitation and weather, which will increase the number of cases related to mental and physical health. For example, due to severe weather events there will be an increase in vector borne diseases and injuries (i.e., parasites, viruses and bacteria spread by insects); or due to uncertainty, could increase mental health distress present in the community and/or exacerbate existing mental health conditions. Change in the environment impacts the health of individuals and communities, healthcare delivery, emergency care response and the healthcare workforce. The College supports the implementation of systems, initiatives and legislation that respond to severe crisis events and impacts, looking at extreme weather, air quality and sanitation as this greatly effects the quality of patient-centred care and outcomes for. Policies and legislation, as well as programs (i.e., literacy, training, and education) must be prioritised now to support an adaptable health workforce in delivering high-quality care.

Resilience

Building resilience within a community, individual and across the health sector, starts with education, discussion and health crisis literacy for communities and health professions. The College supports programs and initiatives that prioritise paramedics' health and wellbeing, education and training across emergency, urgent and primary care in pre and post crisis situations.

Paramedic health and wellbeing

Paramedics need continued support to adjust to the personal and psychological impacts of working in crisis situations. There could be an increased risk of PTSD and emotional responses during attendance due to more trauma work. There could also be higher levels of suicidality, in line with the anticipated increase in the general population. To support paramedics, access to mental health and wellbeing services and resources needs to be a top priority.

Funding support

Commonwealth funding opportunities and structures need to be developed for the three stages outlined - preparedness, responsiveness and resilience - to ensure the health sector understands their role and can implement a crisis strategy to better support their communities. Particular focus should be given to rural and remote communities which are already grappling with health access issues. It is important to review and amend funding policies now to better prepare the system to cope in crisis situations such as the Medicare Benefit Scheme and Workforce Incentive Programs. Investing in health professionals who are uniquely trained in emergency, urgent and primary care in out-of-hospital settings (like paramedics) would vastly improve health outcomes and health system responsiveness during a crisis situation.

Conclusion

This discussion paper provided a great opportunity to address the opportunities and shortcomings of previous crisis preparedness, responsiveness and resilience. It is important to keep this conversation going, build strategies that educate, inform and better engage the health sector to ensure improved health outcomes for all Australians.

