

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee
Inquiry into the 2021-22 Budget Estimates
18 June 2021

PORTFOLIO: AMBULANCE SERVICES

Witnesses:

- Hon. Martin Foley
- Professor Euan Wallace
- Mr Chris Hotham
- Ms Jodie Geissler
- Associate Professor Tony Walker

QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

QUESTION 1

1. Is Ambulance Victoria aware of any cases where Victorians have died or experienced serious adverse outcomes waiting for an ambulance?

Mr NEWBURY: We all saw the tragic reporting of the woman in her 30s who died waiting for 7 hours for an ambulance in Caulfield – an absolutely tragic, tragic case – and I would say so to Professor Walker if I can ask: are you aware of any other cases where Victorians have died or experienced adverse outcomes waiting for an ambulance?

Assoc. Prof. WALKER: Thank you, Mr Newbury. I am aware of cases that come through our normal quality processes where we may have issues around adverse events related to the care of our patients. I do not have specific details around those today, but they are -

Mr NEWBURY: Are you able to provide them to the committee?

Assoc. Prof. WALKER: Yes, certainly I am. In essence we are a complex health service. We are dealing with more than 13,000 cases a week. From time to time things do go wrong. We are very open and transparent about those issues. We meet with families to work through where things have gone wrong and, importantly, we learn from what has occurred to improve the system so hopefully they never occur again. I am happy to take that on notice and see what is available.

Mr NEWBURY: I am aware of another case where someone has passed in similar circumstances. Are you aware of other cases where – I know you mentioned more broadly that reports come up to you – people have passed?

Assoc. Prof. WALKER: I am not aware specifically of – and I assume you are talking in the context of the case you have related to the late ambulance response –

Mr NEWBURY: Yes.

Assoc. Prof. WALKER: I am not aware of specific cases – I obviously know which one you are referring to. None of them have come to mind of late that I would be able to talk to in detail today.

Mr NEWBURY: In terms of adverse outcomes perhaps – serious adverse outcomes; so not necessarily someone passing but a wait causing a serious adverse outcome.

Assoc. Prof. WALKER: I am not aware of any particular cases that have been raised to my attention of recent times around a delayed ambulance response that led to an adverse outcome. Again, I am happy to take that on notice and come back, but none that have been brought to my attention. Those that obviously I am not aware of are the ones that are currently undergoing review.

BE Hearing Transcript, p. 4 – 5

Name of Committee member asking questions: Mr J Newbury

RESPONSE

Answer:

All Victorian health services, including Ambulance Victoria, are required to report sentinel events to Safer Care Victoria and, where appropriate, the Coroner. These formal investigations seek to establish the facts, determine likely cause or causes of adverse outcomes and provide recommendations for improvement.

As there are formal investigations currently underway, it would be inappropriate to pre-empt any findings.

Source: Ambulance Victoria

QUESTION 2

2. Please provide the number of times people waiting for an ambulance have been provided a taxi?

Mr NEWBURY: ...I can refer you specifically to a case in my own electorate where a woman from Brighton East was told that the wait was such that it would be quicker for her to get a taxi. Are you aware of instances of that nature?

Assoc. Prof. WALKER: Well, no. The decisions we make are based on clinical need. So if there is an urgent need or any requirement for ambulance transport, then an ambulance would be dispatched. These cases would have been done through a clinical review process that determined that there was a social need for transport and that organising a taxi for someone was suitable for those circumstances.

Mr NEWBURY: Is there any reporting of that mechanism? Do you report the number of times people have been provided a taxi?

Assoc. Prof. WALKER: I do not see specific reports. I am happy to take that on notice and see what is available, but I am not aware of any particular reporting that occurs around that – certainly that I see.

BE Hearing Transcript, p. 7

Name of Committee member asking questions: Mr J Newbury

RESPONSE

Answer:

Not all calls through to Triple Zero require an emergency ambulance. In some instances, and in discussion with the patient, Ambulance Victoria will organise a taxi for the patient if their medical condition is less urgent, they do not require any pre-hospital care, and they have no other means of private transport - for example, minor upper limb injuries. Clinicians discuss the option of a taxi with patients, following additional triaging. Ambulance Victoria does not arrange taxis for patients in medical emergencies or whose conditions require supervision.

This clinically appropriate response increases the availability of ambulances to respond to emergencies in the community. In 2020-21 year to date, 9651 cases have appropriately and safely avoided ambulance dispatch through the use of taxis.

Source: Ambulance Victoria

QUESTION 3

3. On how many occasions in metro Melbourne over the last six months have ambulances gone unstaffed?

Mr NEWBURY: ...Referring to page 225 of budget paper 3, Professor Walker, on how many occasions in metro Melbourne over the last six months have ambulances gone unstaffed?

Assoc. Prof. WALKER: Look, I could not answer that question today. I am happy to take that on notice. Our philosophy – well not our philosophy, actually, our approach – is we work to cover every shift. We have seen increased absenteeism in the wake of the pandemic, so we are seeing an increased level of absenteeism, which I know the whole health sector is experiencing, particularly associated with the fatigue of the last 12 to 18 months.

Mr NEWBURY: So that has seen some lack of staffing.

Assoc. Prof. WALKER: Yes, we have seen absenteeism. Our goal is always to fill shifts, and we work tirelessly, actually, to try and cover every shift. There will be times when that does not occur, but I could not -

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you for taking that on notice.

Assoc. Prof. WALKER: Yes, happy to take that on notice.

BE Hearing Transcript, p. 7

Name of Committee member asking questions: Mr J Newbury

RESPONSE

Answer:

Ambulance Victoria successfully added an extra 4,410 shifts in the metropolitan region in the past six months (1 January 2021 to 21 June 2021) – above and beyond rostered shifts.

Source: Ambulance Victoria