

From: David Booth

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Submission to parliamentary enquiry into WA ambulance provision.

Regional ambulance services.

From 1979 to 1996 I was one of four ambulance officers (paramedics) employed by SJA at the Geraldton ambulance sub-centre. During that time most ambulance calls were responded to by one ambulance officer on his own. It became my desire to change this so that two officers would attend every call. My efforts, however, were rebuffed by the management of SJA. Over the course of those many years the reason for this gradually became apparent. It was this: the only way that SJA can keep its hold on the WA ambulance service is to prove to the Health Dept that to take over the ambulance responsibilities would be far more expensive to government than leaving it as is. Thus they keep their jobs.

Your enquiry is the fourth of its kind I am aware of. Each of the previous three has resulted in 15 or 20 recommendations, none of which have ever been implemented.

The third enquiry I am aware of was in 1996, and I have to take the credit for causing it by my unceasing efforts to save the lives of my people - the residents of Geraldton and surrounds while I was on duty - as I saw it. The chairman of that review was the Hon Bruce Donaldson.

One outcome of the Donaldson review was that the Health Dept would fully fund extra staff at all the country WA substations which then had professional paramedics but were under manned to the point where one-man ambulances were the norm. This amounted to 12 trained paramedics. First priority was for Geraldton to have an increase of 4. Albany, Port Hedland and Collie were also to be increased. (Note Bunbury has had full crews since the 1980s). As this was at a time when the WA budget was threadbare, I was most impressed that my efforts had finally resulted in some sanity.

The sequel to this was as follows: all pay rises at the time had to be cost neutral. The Ambulance Officers Union in Perth voted to cancel the extra country officers in favour of a pay rise for themselves. As the pay of Management rises in proportion to that of the paramedics the decision was rubber stamped by them, and as they had fought tooth and nail to resist extra country staff it is quite probable that they instigated the move.

Accountability

Information within SJA is managed. A country Station Officer sends in a monthly report to the Country Superintendent. He collates all these and reports to the Chief Superintendent. He gathers all this detailed information and statistical evidence and reports to the CEO. The CEO reports monthly to the Committee. The Committee consists of various well meaning people who give up one day a month to trot along and consider weighty matters over tea and biscuits.

The CEO (at least in my day) was not informed of matters which the Chief Superintendent thought he should not know. I know this for a fact as it was amply demonstrated to me. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The point I make is that SJA is not accountable to anyone. Its primary purpose is to remain as the one and only ambulance provider, just as the primary purpose of a politician is to be reelected. You will not be told the truth if it threatens their position. While this is all very well, and to be expected, it should not come at the cost of starving the country ambulance services, forcing the continuation of one man ambulances.

If you don't fully realise the consequences of an ambulance with a crew of only one I have a very thick file available to persuade you of its hazards. I have more than once felt that I was about to die as a result, and I assure you with complete honesty that patients have died because of it.

It may be of interest to note that in 1996 Geraldton had 107 police staff, 14 fire brigade officers and 4 ambulance officers.

Volunteers are not the answer when a professional medical service is required. I could enlarge on this aspect at great length (oh boy could I!) but volunteers are too well-meaning to be fair targets, bless them. Just ask yourself how many volunteer nurses, accountants, plumbers or bus drivers there are. Do you really think two weekends of training qualify someone to remove your family from a car wreck? They're not even insured properly by SJA. They see things they are not equipped to emotionally deal with, to their great injury. And so on. To use volunteers is a moral crime against them, the patient and the paramedic. It can't be helped in more remote areas with few call-outs, I don't dispute that, although I could make a case for better training plus some actual pay.

While SJA may have changed some things in the last 24 years, I believe that it will be the same old story with your enquiry, as with all the others. [REDACTED]. Patient care is a secondary consideration with them all. The truth is not in Belmont, nor ever shall be.

Are you here for decent patient care, or to save money? It's a quandary. You can't do both. And if you want the truth, suggest one man vans for Perth as a cost saving measure, and see what happens.

I have a very thick file of correspondence, to and from the Minister down, and evidence to back up my statements - some of which is incendiary. Over the years it all really did my head in. It began for me at 3 am one night when I had just dropped off a lass at the mortuary. I thought to resign. But then, that it wouldn't change anything if I did. So I would stay and do all in my power to make it change. After all, how hard could it be to do away with the insanity of one man vans? Not much to ask.

I've had nothing to do with the Geraldton ambulance service since 1996, except recently when I spoke with a paramedic at the hospital here. He was on his own, so it seemed that nothing much has changed. Now it's up to you, and good luck.

Yours faithfully,

David Booth

(aged 73)