

Submission
No 165

INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

Name: Name suppressed
Date received: 27 July 2017

Partially
Confidential

INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

Organisation:

This submission is in relation to the uniforms NSW Ambulance Paramedics are required to wear and thus is offered pursuant to the Committee's Terms of

Reference: *d) the appropriateness of uniforms provided to personnel in emergency services agencies*

I contend current uniform is not sufficiently "optioned" for use by an ambulance service in Australia – it's just too damned hot! The photo below is from a news article related to expat Australians now working for London Ambulance Service – wearing the summer uniform for paramedics in London. Other than being a different colour and not having reflective strips on the trousers the uniform is almost identical to that worn by paramedics in NSW – where the climate is rather hotter than England.



Why can paramedics in NSW not be allowed to wear a comfortable 100% cotton uniform consisting of a neat and presentable polo type shirt, and cargo trousers with zip off lower legs or shorts?

Paramedics can be forced to work in areas without air conditioning for extended period – car crashes etc – on hot black tarred roads or down road side culverts where because you are essentially in a below ground ditch there is no breeze or inside building etc with no A/C and no breeze.

When people are normally required to work in hot environments a period of acclimatisation is built into their induction. Moreover, the work is programed to have built in rotations out of the hot environment for drink breaks and rest in cooler areas – this is simply not practicable our work environment. Moreover, the work can be frantic and physical! Rotation out of hot areas will only happen for protracted incidents because it takes time to arrange and bring additional resources in – if additional resources are available.

When we attend patients in the heat of summer it is not uncommon for us to scoop them up and move them inside the ambulance where it is air conditioned - simply to get away from the heat – because our uniform is too hot. This is often far from ideal because it means patients are often moved into the ambulance before treatment – or paramedics stay and play in the heat, and can get so hot that we can't think clearly. This can be simply because the physical discomfort is overwhelming or in the worst case scenario the paramedic's brain is just too hot to function. I have often encountered patients in whom their temperature is for whatever reason raised – infection or exposure – but once it reaches 38.8 or so and over – their brain function deteriorates until they are cooled down. Our brains are not superhuman and if too hot – we will make mistakes.

As a consequence our overly hot uniform represents a clinical risk to both our patients and paramedics – which is completely avoidable.

It appears that it is our non-operational managers who object most to us wearing a smart pair of shorts and a smart casual polo shirt (with appropriate markings). Maybe this is in part because they like their pseudo military uniform and badges of rank (which few of us who work on the road even recognise let alone care about). But we are happy if they want to play soldier wearing their rank on their shoulders – just let us wear a comfortable uniform.

As I see it, those who work in air conditioned offices – only going into the heat while moving from their air conditioned car to the office and back – never having to stop and manage a patient on the way, have no right to stop us feeling comfortable.

While working in areas devoid of A/C to provide good care to our patients, we need to be physically as comfortable as practicable and a uniform that minimises heat build-up is essential for patient and paramedic safety.

Issues with Current Uniform

- The NSW Industrial Relations Commission told paramedics to not wear a tee shirt under their short sleeve shirts to make it cooler. However, what about our female paramedics – this means when they are bending down – as we must do on a daily basis – anyone standing up can see straight down their shirt front. Maybe the IRC Commissioner would say – wear a tie to stop that.
- A neat polo shirt which falls loose on one's body would go a long way to keeping the modesty of our wonderful female paramedics.
- The current style of uniform was introduced because it was supposed to be more comfortable – we could wear the over-shirt/tunic with the front zip closed if it was cold and open (with a tee shirt under) if it was hot.
- It did not have to be tucked in – thereby it allowed airflow around our torso – however it is long sleeved and heavy so a short sleeve shirt was introduced for summer. It however must be tucked in

- Since the short sleeve shirt was introduced the new mode of dress direction is that the over shirt MUST be worn fully zipped up at all times – therefore if we get hot while wearing it we are not “allowed” to unzip it and let air flow. Thus the whole purpose of changing uniform – to be comfortable has been undone.
- The current uniform is not 100% cotton so it has some synthetic component (plastic/nylon) which despite the fancy speak and spin used by manufacturers of synthetic fabrics – it is hotter than cotton of similar GSM.
- Somehow, probably due to the polyester component, sweat from the underarms sticks hard to the fabric of the short sleeve shirts and despite vigorous washing – we smell like dirty armpits the next time we wear the shirt.
- While our short sleeved summer shirt – is designed to be loose fitting – it is a business style cut of shirt so unlike polo type shirts or tee shirts, it tends to sit away from the skin. Look at yourself in the mirror next time you wear a business shirt – you will see what I mean. Where it doesn’t touch the skin, it doesn’t soak sweat up so it doesn’t wick the moisture away to be evaporated. Instead the sweat runs in dribbles down your back and puddles at the top of your bum where the belt of your trousers makes a dam – which doesn’t evaporate so we have sweat pooling – not cooling!
- While some staff might look great in a body hugging type shirt that absorbs every drop of sweat – the rest of us would be happy, I am sure with a “floppy” type fit, like what a tee shirt gives you. It touches skin as you move and change posture and thus absorbs sweat with normal body movement – takes it to the surface of the fabric where it evaporates and cools. A loose fitting soft cotton polo style shirt can take that sweat away – cool us down and look presentable at the same time.
- “Long shorts” are another essential option for paramedics and they comply with Safe Work Australia ISBN 978-1-74361-134-0. They allow for air to flow around upper legs and groin to take heat away. If the employer does not want to cough up for both shorts and trousers – give us zip off cargo trousers.

- In winter (or when needed operationally – in bush fire zones etc) we can attach the bottom half of each leg but when hot and safe to do so – we can zip the bottom half off and turn them into long shorts thus complying with ISBN 978-1-74361-134-0
- If we must wear long trousers they should be belt less suspender type trousers (like fire fighters) which allow air to move upwards by convection uninterrupted by a belt which prevents air flow. I am sure however most would see a pair of shorts as more presentable.
- When the new operational uniform was rolled out ? circa 2007/08 I wore the poly cotton version but due to a medical condition, I was able to obtain the 100% cotton version and am adamant it is cooler than the poly/cotton version but is still too hot because there is insufficient air movement.
- Managers are pushing for a trial of a uniform with vents and a lower polyester component but it seems we are just trying to reinvent the wheel when we know – without a trial that shorts are cooler than long trousers. 100% cotton is cooler than fabric with a plastic component. Soft cotton tee shirt like material is cooler than a business shirt because it contacts the skin and wicks sweat away to be evaporated.
- The only reason I can imagine for managers not wanting us to wear a more casual but at the same time smart and comfortable uniform is that it takes us away from the pseudo-military uniform.
- I, like the CEO of Cotton Australia believe we should be wearing 100% cotton uniform. Like the CE of Cotton Australia said¹ *"As representatives of farmers who spend many hours outside, we really feel for paramedics working long shifts in heatwave conditions while wearing hot and heavy, long-sleeved shirts made from a polyester blend,"* says Cotton Australia CEO, Adam Kay.

¹ <http://cottonaustralia.com.au/news/article/australian-cotton-the-solution-to-nsw-paramedics-uniform-woes>

- *"Cotton farmers know a thing or two about the fibre they produce, and that's why they choose to wear it themselves while working out in the fields and around the farm."*
- *"Australian cotton would be an excellent choice for paramedics' uniforms - it is light and soft, and suitable for use against the skin. Unlike synthetic fibres, such as polyester, cotton is a natural fibre known for its breathable qualities."*
- Why can't we help Aussie cotton farmers out and at the same time get paramedics into comfortable uniforms – which are practical, layered, adaptable and comfortable?