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David Shugg
david.shugg@med.monash.au

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**“A FIRST RESPONDER PROGRAM – A PROGRAM USING FIRE FIGHTERS
AND AMBULANCE PARAMEDICS”**

David Shugg

Senior Lecturer and Head of Professional Development Unit
Monash University Centre for Ambulance and Paramedic Studies

Using fire fighters to respond to medical emergencies in Melbourne was first advanced by a former Chief Fire Officer of the Metropolitan Fire Brigades Board (MFB) more than 20 years ago. At that time, he identified the need for fire fighters to be involved in other aspects of emergency response and to broaden their knowledge and skills. A Public Bodies Review also later identified this. However the real push occurred in 1990 when the Victorian Kennett Government was determined to reduce the expenditure on the public purse and started a vigorous program of downsizing and outsourcing to both reduce public expenditure and increase productivity. The fire fighter first responder program was seen by the Government as a way to effectively utilise fire fighters that were already in the system as a way of reducing the publicly criticized public ambulance response times to emergencies.

The MFESB formally introduced the First Responder Program in 1994 after a long period of consultation, negotiation and planning with stakeholders. Initially the program operated within an agreed designated small area where the MFESB units would be dispatched at the same time as the Metropolitan Ambulance Service to telephone 000 reported life-threatening emergencies. The pilot program was later expanded and now covers the entire Melbourne Fire District using 1380 first responder trained fire fighters.

Overall, the program has demonstrated a reduction in response times to life threatening emergencies. However, there have been some aspects that require further investigation. There have been significant challenges with the introduction and continuation of the service due to inter service issues, turf protection, cultural acceptance and communication problems.

The paper will present an overview of the planning, training and operations of the fire fighter first responder program in Melbourne. It will also discuss the benefits and difficulties encountered.