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The Australian College of Ambulance Professionals (ACAP) 2003 National Pre-Hospital Care Conference

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CONFERENCE REPORT

The Australian College of Ambulance Professionals 2003 National Pre-Hospital Care Conference

Bill Lord

The Wrest Point Convention Centre in Hobart, Tasmania, was the venue for the 2003 National Pre-Hospital Care Conference, hosted by the Tasmanian Branch of the Australian College of Ambulance Professionals. Adopting a theme of "Expanding Horizons: A Fresh Perspective", the organisers sought to engage delegates in reflection on professional issues and trends in clinical practice.

A large number of delegates attended this two-day conference. Participants were able to critique the presentations during the scheduled sessions, and during social events that enabled individuals to establish and strengthen professional networks between people involved in the prehospital phase of patient care. The Governor of Tasmania, Sir Guy Green, opened the conference and later hosted a reception for delegates at Government House.

A considerable number of trade displays exhibited a diverse range of products. The support of the trade exhibitors reinforced the status of this annual event as the premier prehospital conference in Australasia. As is always the case, the Tasmanian organisers produced an exceptionally well conceived and executed conference that should have been of relevance to all those with an interest in emergency health in the prehospital setting.

Presentations included findings of research undertaken in the prehospital setting. Of note was the increasing emphasis on research as an integral process in establishing a prehospital-specific knowledge base to inform practice and strategic decisions. Evidence-based medicine is an established discipline, and the principles arising from this field of study are increasingly used to guide practice decisions in the prehospital setting. Given the relative infancy of prehospital care as an emerging health profession, the imperative to establish a reliable knowledge base to guide clinical decisions appears to be a priority.

Helen Webb is one such researcher contributing to prehospital practice through the research of head injury outcomes following paramedic intervention. Given the importance that basic life support skills such as airway management and oxygenation have on mortality and morbidity following traumatic brain injury, this researcher's findings raise some serious concerns about the standard of care currently provided during the prehospital phase of treatment provided for these patients.

The role of the "paramedic practitioner" was the focus of several presentations. Stimulus for this increased interest appears to have arisen from recent re-evaluation of the paramedic's role. While the genesis for the role of paramedic - particularly at the intensive care level - was a high incidence of prehospital deaths from coronary artery disease and trauma, recent health trends have forced an examination of the role that paramedics may have in non-traditional areas of health care, health prevention and education. This is reflected in trends in Australian paramedic education programs that aim to equip graduates for extended roles in community-based emergency health care.

Other presentations addressed a diverse range of interests. Professionalism was certainly a theme that the conference organisers were hoping to promote. However, the debate on this tended to suffer from the lack of reliable theoretical foundations upon which this discussion could be based. When compared with other health disciplines, prehospital care has a great deal of work to do in establishing philosophical frameworks to support the position of paramedics as health professionals.

Overall, the conference was very well organised and the event provided much needed opportunities to interact with individuals who share a common interest in emergency health care in the prehospital environment. The next ACAP conference is in Alice Springs from 9-11 September. More information may be obtained from www.acap.org.au