

SCOTTISH COVID-19 INQUIRY

OPENING STATEMENT FOR THE COLLEGE OF PARAMEDICS

1. The College of Paramedics, a membership organisation with around 1100 members in Scotland (and 22,000 across the UK), welcomes the opportunity to participate in and contribute to the Scottish Covid-19 Inquiry. It seeks to do that as the recognised professional body for paramedics, with a role to promote, represent and develop the paramedic profession as a whole, without restricting the support to members only.
2. The College regularly publishes documents that underpin the profession, including undergraduate and postgraduate study materials, practice education guidance and a postgraduate career framework. The College also organises a variety of national stakeholder working groups, advisory committees and research projects. Their Research and Development Advisory Committee actively works on shaping research policy and activity on behalf of the profession.
3. The College is acutely aware that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on its members as individuals, as well as on the profession as a whole. The College, on behalf of its members from Scotland, would like to acknowledge the impact the pandemic had on the Scottish public and how devastating it has been for thousands of families across Scotland. Our members saw people at their most vulnerable and we pay testament to their courage and fortitude during the pandemic. There has also been an unwelcome negative impact on patient care, the long-term effects of which are only now being understood. Paramedics in Scotland, and more widely across the UK, were healthcare workers who continuously placed themselves at risk for the benefit of others.
4. It became apparent to the College as the pandemic progressed that paramedics, and the unique issues they faced, were not being taken into account when guidance was issued and decisions taken about the way paramedics worked. The guidance issued in respect of paramedics working in the ambulance environment did not take account of the fact that the rear of an ambulance is a small, enclosed area, which was often not capable of being ventilated, nor was it appropriate to ventilate that area when carrying very sick patients or waiting outside hospitals to off-load their patients. During the pandemic, the waiting times for hospital admissions rose exponentially, meaning that paramedics and ambulance technicians were often contained within an ambulance, with very sick patients, for many hours at a time.

5. Prior to attending a patient it was often the case that the Covid-19 status of patients (and the others within the same household) was unknown, something which was particularly acute in the early stages of the pandemic and which resulted in great pressure on the profession.
6. These difficulties were compounded by the lack of appropriate PPE – either a complete lack, or the provision of inappropriate PPE. The College had an early concern that the governments in the UK were not being properly advised (or perhaps not taking account of advice) as to how a virus is transmitted. The early Infection Prevention and Control Cell advice was to the effect that the primary pathway for transmission of the Covid-19 virus was by way of droplet; it took no consideration of the significant airborne route of transmission. The failure to recognise that led to the use of the inadequate Fluid Resistant Surgical Masks, rather than higher level Respiratory Protective Equipment such as FFP3 masks.
7. As a result of difficulties identified in relation to the lack of guidance for paramedics in particular, the College joined a wider alliance of bodies (the Aerosol Generating Procedures Alliance) with the specific aim of drawing to the attention of the various home nation governments their concerns (shared by many healthcare organisations) around the way in which the mode of transmission was being mischaracterised. The use of the “wrong” PPE led to many avoidable infections, impacting on the provision of services from delivery of frontline care to the telephone triaging of calls.
8. The College feels very strongly that the paramedic profession was let down by the lack of appropriate and specific guidance available to them during the pandemic. Paramedics were frontline workers, often the first health care workers to see very sick patients, and they were doing so without adequate PPE, a matter which the Inquiry will undoubtedly be able to explore in some detail. Paramedics, faced with very unwell patients, experienced feelings of guilt or discomfort in any delays in treating patients, even when they did have PPE to apply. Reports of paramedics not being seen as helpful towards patients or families at times when the guidance they required to adhere to was changing regularly (and often on a daily basis), have been difficult for a profession made up of caring individuals. The regular updating of guidance was not easy to keep pace with, in a profession which is largely not desk bound but actively out in public.
9. The College wishes to be involved in the investigation being run by the Scottish Covid-19 Inquiry to review whether the Scottish Government, the Scottish Ambulance Service, and other healthcare providers had proper regard to the safety and welfare of ambulance workers working in their unique environment when responding to the pandemic. This is relevant not only to both the protection of the health and wellbeing of those paramedics, but also (and importantly) to the protection of their ability to remain healthy to care for others. Paramedics were required to work throughout the

pandemic, often at times when there was little other traffic or movement around them, a lonely position indeed.

10. The impact on the education of those paramedics who were students during the pandemic also cannot be overlooked. The Inquiry will have available to it evidence from those in training who were unable to benefit from the usual placements (particularly in hospital units), which has led to gaps in education – leaving the current paramedic body less qualified or experienced than it was prior to the pandemic. That is particularly acute in the circumstances of many paramedics leaving the profession as a direct result of their experiences during the pandemic period.
11. Student paramedics also faced difficulties in accessing the vaccine early enough given their age, leading to further infection.
12. The College of Paramedics wishes to hear the evidence on each of these issues and wishes to reflect on, and learn from, the strain the pandemic has caused to the paramedic resources available in Scotland generally. There has undoubtedly been a hidden impact, which the Inquiry ought to be in a position to display through its work in the coming months.

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