

Sunday, 20 January 2008

[Print](#) | [Close](#)

Ambulances not a taxi fleet: union

Emily Sherlock

A THIRD of all ambulance call-outs in the ACT turn out to be unnecessary jobs ranging from toothaches to hangovers.

The figure which equated to about 10,000 jobs last financial year comes as other jurisdictions raise concerns about the number of frivolous call outs and ambulances being sent to jobs classed as emergencies which end up being paper cuts and grazes.

So frustrated by the situation in Queensland with the service currently having a call-out rate 30 per cent above the national average the Government is considering on-the-spot fines for those misusing the system.

Queensland Ambulance Union state organiser Jason Dutton said the service was being used as a "taxi" with people blatantly faking or exaggerating their injuries and illness to get a lift to the hospital or into the centre of town where the main hospitals were located.

But Transport Workers Union official Ben Sweeney said in the ACT the large amount of overtime incurred was a much bigger problem than minor call outs.

"While little jobs may be a regular strain it is more the overtime and the incredibly long working week, with hours of overtime they can't refuse to keep the vehicles on the road.

"Obviously there is an element of the community that treat the service like a taxi because they have paid their taxes ... and then get a rude shock when they get a bill."

In the last financial year, ACT Ambulance made 32,276 responses for assistance with 77 per cent considered emergencies and half of those urgent.

ACT Ambulance Service manager of clinical services, Howard Wren, said of total ambulance cases, "about one third" are retrospectively assessed as not really needing an ambulance.

These included jobs where a patient:

consumed alcohol last night, now vomiting

felt unwell, and their regular doctor was away

was a teenager with a toothache for two days

had the flu for three days, was no worse but called for an ambulance at 2am.

Mr Sweeney and Mr Wren said it was important for people to understand arriving at hospital in an ambulance did not affect how quickly you were seen.

"Patients are categorised according to their clinical need, regardless of their means of arrival," Mr Wren said.

However, Mr Wren said it was important for people who genuinely thought they had or were unsure if they had a serious medical condition to call ACT Ambulance for assistance.

Canberra has a user-pays ambulance service.

The Canberra Times

Copyright © 2008. Rural Press Limited