



HEALTH PROFESSIONS COUNCIL OF SOUTH AFRICA

PROFESSIONAL BOARD FOR EMERGENCY CARE

POSITION STATEMENT ON SOCIAL DETERMINANTS ON HEALTH

INTRODUCTION

The need for timeous and appropriate access to emergency treatment and transportation is an important determinant of the health status of individuals. Emergency medical services (EMS) in South Africa focus on meeting this need through the provision of acute medical treatment in the pre-hospital setting and transportation of patients to, and between, health facilities.

It is acknowledged that only responding to adverse health events after they occur has limited impact on improvement of health of communities as a whole. It is also acknowledged that the overall health status of individuals and communities is largely determined by social determinants of health. In the context of social injustice and economic deprivation, the circumstances in which marginalized and vulnerable communities live and work are characterized by unhealthy conditions, such as (but not limited to):

- a) unsafe housing, workplaces and transportation,
- b) inter-personal and gender-based violence,
- c) exposure to environmental hazards,
- d) risk-taking behavior among young people,
- e) drug and alcohol abuse,
- f) poor nutrition,
- g) declining physical or mental health activity,
- h) impeded access to quality education,
- i) unstimulating and unsafe child care,
- j) unemployment and under-employment,
- k) poor access to sanitation and other basic services, and
- l) xenophobic violence.

By working within communities and gaining access to the homes, workplaces and other environments in which adverse health events occur, emergency care personnel are directly exposed to these social determinants of health and their health effects on a daily basis. Emergency care personnel are therefore uniquely positioned to play a key role in proactively identifying and responding to social determinants of health in communities – thereby contributing to health promotion and disease prevention.

RESOLUTION AND CALL FOR ACTION

The Professional Board Emergency Care (PBEC) endorses the findings of the World Health Organisation that “social injustice is killing people on a grand scale” and calling for action by relevant stakeholders to: improve daily living conditions; tackle the inequitable distribution of power, money and resources; and measure and understand the problem and assess the impact of action.

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The PBEC is committed to reviewing Emergency Care education and research, scope of practice, protocol and policies to be explicitly inclusive of health promotion and preventative care (upstream interventions) where appropriate.

The PBEC calls upon EMS organisations to –

1. recognize that they have an important role to play in responding to social determinants of health within the communities in which they work, and to educate their work force about this role;
2. encourage personnel to engage in health promotion activities, such as providing education in local schools and clinics on healthy lifestyles and injury prevention;
3. encourage personnel to identify and report health-related risks and threats to individuals and communities, and develop appropriate channels and protocols for such reporting and subsequent appropriate referral to take place; and
4. proactively develop, or utilise existing, intersectoral forums and referral networks with sectors such as local municipalities, social services, SAPS, education departments, water and sanitation departments, human settlements departments, traffic and road agencies, health departments and community-based organisations so that risks identified by EMS personnel can be rapidly and effectively addressed by the appropriate agencies and authorities;
5. develop appropriate, practical systems to monitor and evaluate the impact made by any interventions from various authorities;
6. recognize and advance the role of EMS organisations and personnel in advocacy to ensure that policies developed at all levels of government are responsive to social determinants of health.

The PBEC also calls upon all providers of EMS education to –

- i. educate EMS students and practitioners on the importance of social determinants on health outcomes, and the role that they should be playing in identifying and responding to social determinants of health;

¹ Commission on Social Determinants of Health. *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health. Final report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health.* Geneva, World Health Organization, 2008.

- ii. regularly engage and review curricula to ensure its relevance to current social determinants of health of the time;
- iii. ensure that research agendas incorporate a focus on exploring opportunities for EMS to improve its impact on health outcomes through appropriately responding to social determinants of health.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a fundamental transformation is required in the conceptualization and implementation of the role of emergency care providers from only a narrow reactive response to emergencies to include a more meaningful and sustainable responsiveness to 'determinants' of emergencies and health. Emergency care providers must partner in a community of practice with all relevant stakeholders who contribute towards reducing burden of disease and improving quality of life. In so doing, the emergency care profession is responsive to World Health Assembly and World Health Organisation calls for reduction of health inequities through comprehensive intersectoral action on the social determinants of health.²

² World Health Assembly Resolution WHA62.14. *Reducing health inequities through action on the social determinants of health*. 22 May 2009. World Health Organisation *Rio Political Declaration on Social Determinants of Health* 21 October 2011.