

Pre-hospital emergency care research in South Africa: where are we now as a profession?

The expansion of knowledge is perhaps one of the greatest achievements of humankind. Through the centuries we have gathered information, both structured and not, that shapes our view of the world and the way we interact with each other and our surroundings. The scientific method came about as a structured approach to help us focus on specific problems and answer unique questions. This has led to our knowledge of medicine greatly increasing over time, allowing us to extend life by caring for the ill and injured. Clinical practice has improved greatly because of persistent knowledge acquisition, which forms the basis of modern evidence-based and informed medicine. Over the last few decades, it has become prudent to start medical care as early as possible, given its link to positive outcomes and survival. Pre-hospital emergency care has been at the forefront of this clinical approach by initiating medical care at the site of illness or injury. However, the knowledge used within this setting has primarily been taken from the in-hospital environment and transposed pre-hospitally. Although a holistic approach would see the chain of medical care be continuous, irrespective of setting, the systems and processes that support pre-hospital emergency care are uniquely different. It is thus important to build and expand our knowledge base of emergency care in the pre-hospital setting, to ensure continued development and improvement of medical care within this space.

Pre-hospital emergency care began in its current form in South Africa through the provision of emergency medical services back in the 1970s, with short course training being the standard since the 1980s, and professional registration introduced in the 1990s.¹ As training developed, university programmes started to evolve up to degree-based learning in the 2000s. University education naturally brings with it the theory and application of research within the profession.² Revealing the power of research to all South African pre-hospital clinicians has led to an ever-growing appetite for the profession to expand its knowledge-base. Enthusiasm snowballed throughout the last decade with an ever-increasing number of pre-hospital providers attaining higher degrees and publishing journal articles. This was greatly driven by the increase in student numbers and outputs at the University of the Witwatersrand in the north and the University of Cape Town in the south. Smaller numbers were seen across other universities. However, with the growth of pre-hospital emergency care education in South Africa, we are

seeing more and more postgraduates study at institutions from all over the country.

The growth of pre-hospital emergency care research in South Africa has undeniably expanded our literature base. The Emergency Care Society of South Africa (ECSSA) recognises this expansion, its contribution to our knowledge-base and the impact it will have on the future of the profession. Thus far, research has been scattered and varied, depending on the interests of individual researchers or institutions. For any profession to grow, there needs to be some structure in place to help guide the knowledge that is being created, to achieve a common goal for the benefit of everyone within the profession and those we care for and serve. To establish a future research agenda, it is important to recognise and record what has already been done. To that end, we completed a scoping review, available in this issue, of all published research that focuses on pre-hospital emergency care in South Africa, including a supplementary list of all the literature found.³

As a profession evolves, its researchers and practitioners start to develop a sense of curiosity that drives the expansion of knowledge and ultimately improves the profession. It is vital for a professional body, like ECSSA, to collate and organise relevant literature-based knowledge so that it can inform decision-making and drive future research activities that expand and improve the profession. This review takes the first step in describing what has been done thus far. It shows the exponential increase in research outputs since the introduction of degree-based programmes. It highlights the geographical disparities that exist due to most research being conducted within the large urban areas of the country. Most importantly, it shows the diverse range of research studies that have been conducted over a wide range of topics. Although this review only describes what has been done, we urge everyone to read the papers we have collated, and we intend to expand and delve deeper into these topics through future publications. Looking at how much research has been done on pre-hospital emergency care in South Africa, we should all take a moment to admire what the profession has achieved over the last decade and envisage the exciting future that lies ahead.

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References

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