

LIVES AT RISK

By Genevieve Marston

Road crash victims' lives are at risk because of communication delays between emergency services, a CFS volunteer and trauma doctor claims.

Dr Bruce Paix - a retrieval doctor with the Royal Adelaide Hospital's Mediflight service, and a member of the Echunga CFS brigade - says there is a serious problem with time gaps between the SA Ambulance Service (SAAS) and the CFS being notified of the same crash following a '000' call.

The doctor began investigating times, using a website to track dispatches

across the State in the past month. He found 24 cases in 24 days where the time gaps were more than five minutes and up to 21 minutes.

Dr Paix decided to speak out about delays after being involved, as a CFS volunteer, in two recent accidents at Meadows and Echunga.

At Meadows the CFS was paged 13 minutes after the ambulance and at Echunga the paramedics were dispatched 21 minutes after the CFS was contacted.

However, emergency services spokesmen have defended their protocols, questioning the validity of Dr Paix's claims.

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Dr Bruce Paix - a retrieval doctor on the Royal Adelaide Hospital's Mediflight service, and a member of the Echunga CFS - says communication delays are placing crash victim lives at risk.

Time delays put lives at risk

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The spokesmen also said it was sometimes difficult for '000' callers to "accurately assess the emergency services requirements at the scene of a road crash".

When someone reports a crash, the agency first contacted will notify other emergency services according to the details provided in the initial call.

"Regardless of which agency takes the initial call - police, ambulance or fire - they must immediately ensure the other emergency services are also aware of the incident," Dr Paix said.

He attributed the delay to "human laxity" - different agencies failing to share '000' information with other services in a timely manner.

"There is a standard response to any vehicle accident in SA and that involves the simultaneous call-out of all the relevant emergency services, CFS, SA Ambulance and SA Police,"

Dr Paix said. "There are proven life-saving reasons for doing this.

"The 'gold standard' in trauma is to get the trauma victim to hospital within an hour.

"At the Meadows crash, a serious accident with entrapment, requiring 'jaws of life' rescue and medical retrieval, nearly a quarter of the 'golden hour' was lost due to unnecessary delays in calling out the rescue truck".

Chain of command

Dr Paix raised his concerns with the CFS but nothing was done.

"I went two steps up the chain (of command) to CFS Region 1 and said 'this is happening. This is dangerous. This is going to cost lives. I'm appalled. Do you know about it?'" he said.

"(Their) response was 'yes we know about it. The (State) Government knows about it. The Government has done a risk assessment on it and has

decided to take no action until the new computer dispatch system comes in, and that could be in a year or two."

SAAS general manager of State communications Kevin Bate, said his call-takers' first priority when receiving a '000' call was to collect as much information as possible to initiate life-saving treatment

The next priority was supporting the caller and that could involve giving first aid advice over the phone.

"It's vital that we do send the right resources to every job, and this is not something which can be determined immediately at the receipt of a 000 call," Mr Bate said.

SAFECOM acting senior communications officer Steve Moir said MFS, CFS and SES were sent out as soon as they were notified about a crash by ambulance or police.