

Development of the Ambulance Service: Factors which historically have influenced the ambulance service

War and battlefields

Simply put, the injured in battle require transport. Originally these were provided by horse-drawn litters and wagons until the late nineteenth century when automobiles developed alongside horse-drawn models. In 1867 the City of London Metropolitan Asylums Board received six horse-drawn ambulances to convey patients with fever to hospital. They resembled private carriages but had rollers on the floor to allow patients to be loaded on to a special bed. In 1909 we saw an ambulance with an internal combustion engine, pneumatic tyres and electric lights. In the First World War, the Red Cross brought in the first widespread battlefield motor ambulances.

Advances in Technology

In the First World War, the equipment carried by ambulances was changing fast, for instance traction splints for leg fractures were introduced. Two-way radios became available shortly after the war, and prior to the Second World War a modern ambulance carried medical supplies, was staffed by a doctor and dispatched by radio. The Second World War placed increased demand on the services and the need was so great that vehicles like vans and hearses were commandeered and doctors were transferred to the armed services.

Modern Ambulances (mobile ambulances for on-scene care)

In 1952, well-developed studies demonstrated the need to overhaul ambulance services. There were major changes in the 1970s, and standards in ambulance construction reflected considerations such as the height of the patient care area (which allowed an attendant to continue care during transport), and the weight of the equipment. Design is still evolving, making improvements to safeguard the ambulance crews and their specialist equipment.

Emergency Medical Personnel

Today, these are well-trained staff regulated by the Care Quality Commission. They include paramedics, emergency medical technicians and emergency care assistants. In the 1990s some British universities started to offer paramedicine diplomas and degrees.

A recently-retired Senior Paramedic was quoted in a newspaper article: "When I started in 1969 they were more interested in my driving skills and vehicle maintenance knowledge." He drove a Ford Transit and didn't even have a First Aid Certificate.

VOLUNTARY SERVICES

The St John Ambulance and Red Cross have given significant contributions to ambulance services. In 1887 at the time of the Queen Victoria Jubilee, the St John Ambulance Brigade (a voluntary organisation) provided free medical care in action in public for the first time.

During the First World War, the St John Ambulance joined the Red Cross to form the Joint War Committee providing medical care for war casualties in hospitals in the UK and overseas. In the Second World War the SJAB acted as an ambulance service until regional ambulance services were set up. In 1948 the formation of the National Health Service altered the role of voluntary ambulance services. Support is now given to local hospital trusts in times of need.