



**Office of the
Health Complaints
Commissioner
2007**

700-0705019 – Tasmanian Ambulance Service – Delay in conveying a terminally ill patient to palliative care– Closed June 2007

Section 23(1)(c) Health Complaints Act 1995 – that a health service provider acted unreasonably in the manner of providing a health service.

The Tasmanian Ambulance Service (TAS) is an emergency service and the issue raised by this complaint was whether the TAS should have treated a terminally ill patient requiring transport to a palliative care ward as an emergency.

In March 2007, a woman whose husband was terminal ill made a telephone call to the TAS requesting that her husband be conveyed to a palliative care ward where a doctor was waiting to admit him. 18 hours elapsed before TAS was able to convey the man to the palliative care ward. During this time he was in a considerable amount of pain and he died the next day. Other issues arose including the method of transferring the patient from his house to the ambulance, and the TAS policy whereby an ambulance can only be ordered for the same day. The woman had sought to book the ambulance for the following day and complained of the rudeness of the operator at the TAS Communications Centre.

The ambulance service explained to the woman why the lifting canvas was necessary and she accepted their explanation. TAS reported that they were unable to respond to the request on that day because of the demand for the service. Since then further funding has been provided to increase ambulance services and to reduce the likelihood of this situation happening again. TAS regretted the distress the situation caused to the complainant and her late husband, but as his case was not deemed an emergency he had to wait.

TAS was questioned as to why information about the private Patient Transport Service was not provided to the woman once it was established that TAS was unable to respond to her request. TAS responded that it is their policy that an ambulance cannot be booked for the following day as its availability cannot be guaranteed, and they do not refer callers to the Ambulance Private. However TAS are now reviewing their procedures for referring non-emergency cases to the Patient Transport Service. TAS reviewed the call requesting an ambulance. The officer assessing the complaint also listened to the record of that conversation and reached the same conclusion that the operator did not intend any rudeness.

The complainant accepted the explanation and apology offered by TAS. She would have preferred verbal updates from TAS as to the estimated arrival of the ambulance,

and she would have liked information about alternative options to her and her late husband. She said nothing could be done now as it is in the past, but it was a shame it had to happen this way. The complaint was dismissed under s. 25(5)(g) on the basis a reasonable explanation had been given. It was noted that the delay in the service provided to the complainant's husband on that day was unsatisfactory given that he was in pain and requiring palliative care. It was accepted that TAS had taken appropriate action to review their policies and procedures and had received additional funding to enable the service to be more responsive.