

The evolution of Paramedicine

A 44-year vet's experience and the next generation of Paramedic Services



Pete Foster

Over a 44 year career in Paramedicine, Pete Foster has witnessed a lot of change. When he decided to join the Paramedic field while in high school, Pete was shocked to discover the only requirement he needed to become a Paramedic in the 1970s was to have the standard First Aid training. After a month of service, he was trained on how to perform CPR, and later some basic anatomy and physiology. "Back then they didn't call us paramedics; we were just ambulance drivers," Pete recalls. "All we really did was get [patients] to the hospital, and now we do a lot more." As the years went on, Pete and fellow paramedics took a Mental Capacity Act (MCA) course at Fanshawe College two nights a week. Today, the education is an ongoing process. "Now," he says. "We have CMEs (Continuing Medical Education) three or four times a year to keep up to date."

A lot of the practices have changed over the years that Pete has been a paramedic. "There was so much we couldn't do then that's possible now," Pete remarks. Some of the biggest advancements Pete has witnessed over the years include the AutoPulse, an automated CPR machine that delivers precise chest compressions in place of hand administered CPR, reducing the frequency of rib fractures.

Having medications on board to administer to patients having diabetic and allergic reactions is also a major improvement that Pete has witnessed over time. New protocols for heart attack and stroke incidents that allow paramedics to transport patients directly to a specialized hospital to get the treatment they need as soon as possible is another big change that Pete finds really impressive.

Benjamin Smith

For Benjamin Smith, May 24, 2016 was a dream come true. The date marked the beginning of his time career with Oxford County Paramedic Services. Following three years of postsecondary education, Ben was hired directly out of school to serve the community in which he grew up.

"It was the biggest honour," the 22 year old Ingersoll resident says. "In my head it felt like I did it; I tackled the world."

Passionate about the sciences while in high school, Ben knew he was set on entering the healthcare field. He hadn't, however, decided on a specific avenue of healthcare to pursue. Sault College's one-year pre-health program offered an opportunity to get a feel for the industry, so in 2013 Ben set off for Sault Ste. Marie.

"They're big on nursing there," he said. "Not anything against nursing but it helped me decide that nursing wasn't for me. Maybe the hospital setting wasn't it."

Instead, he reflected on his memories of watching his father, a fireman, respond to emergency calls. With emergency services in mind, he decided to travel to Fort Frances and give Confederation College's paramedic program a try. He figured it would be easy enough to change his path if he decided being a paramedic wasn't for him. Less than a day into the program, though, Ben knew he wouldn't be switching.

"As soon as I walked in the door I knew right away. First two hours in class I was hooked, I was so intrigued. I loved every lesson."

Getting a paramedic diploma generally takes two years of study. The first year tends to be largely theory, where students are taught the foundational principles that are

Pete Foster, *continued*

The type of calls that the paramedics are responding to has changed over the years as well. “When I started, there was no centre median barrier on the 401, so there were a lot more accidents,” Pete says. With no crumple zones, seat belts, or air bags in cars, most of the calls Pete received in the beginning of his career were trauma calls. “Now, we probably only go out to the 401 twice a month.” With the majority of the calls being medical or cardiac based, the average call now involves monitoring heart activity, administering IV, testing blood sugar and dispensing medicine.

One of the biggest challenges that Pete has faced over the years is dealing with the personal calls. One of the toughest calls Pete faced over the years was when a good friend was involved in a serious motor vehicle collision. His friend had called him earlier in the evening to see if he wanted to go out with him. Pete replied that he couldn’t go, as he was working. Later that night, Pete responded to a call, finding his friend had been in a serious collision, which he did not survive. “That call really bugged me,” Pete says. “Especially since I was supposed to be with him. Anybody else, well I hate to say it but it doesn’t bother me. You can’t let it bother you or you won’t be able to do your job.”

Being able to handle traumatic calls and continue on is essential for the job. “I wish there was some advice I could give, but you just have to deal with it (in your own way). Some people can, some people can’t.” Pete believes that having the hands-on experience during the education process is essential in helping paramedic students figure out early in the process if they are able to handle the stresses that come with the job.

When Pete started, there were 19 paramedics. Today, Oxford County has over 90 paramedics with the new recruits they have recently been hired. These new recruits will be able to pick up Pete’s shifts, as he retired from his long career at the end of June.

And his retirement plans? “I don’t know!” Pete laughs. “I’ve got a big property in the country so that’ll keep me busy in the summer. Maybe I’ll go somewhere warmer in the winter.” Wherever Pete is off to next, Oxford County is grateful to have had his outstanding service and dedication over the past 44 years.

Benjamin Smith, *continued*

applied in practice while doing ‘ride-outs’ and getting field experience during their second year. Once a paramedic diploma has been obtained, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care AEMCA Theory Examination can be taken, to obtain the certification required to be a paramedic in Ontario.

Ben found that the pre-health program had given him a solid foundation of knowledge, especially in regard to medical terminology. He eagerly invested himself in both the theoretical and practical education.

“Paramedics, as a whole, is a never ending evolution of skills,” says Ben. “I think I am getting in the career at the right time, where I can be a frontrunner for learning new things.” Currently certified as a Primary Care Paramedic (PCP), he has not ruled out the potential of continuing his education to become an Advanced Care Paramedic.

For now, with his PCP certifications securely under his belt, Ben is ready to get to work. His first two weeks will consist of training with the County, after which he will be a part-time paramedic, first on an on-call basis and then with scheduled shifts. From there, his goal is to become a full-time employee.

“It’s about a five or six year waiting time, depending on how hard you work. If you take every shift that’s offered to you, you can climb the ranks pretty quickly,” he says. “My hope is that five years down the road from now, I’ll be working full time in one of the bases here in the county.”

“Oxford County, even with the slogan – growing stronger... together – it means a lot to me.”

Ben is confident he will be able to learn and grow alongside his new coworkers. “Everybody has a little bit to add and it’s nice to hear some stories to help you through things,” he says. “You can’t be prepared for everything, but if somebody might have done something similar and maybe done it wrong or right, you can learn from that.”

“Even from the first day I’ll be riding out as a part timer, I will be on cloud nine. Every day that goes by will be an accomplishment in my books.”

While he isn’t sure where his career will take him in 10, 20, or 44 years, Ben is proud to be where he is now and ready to serve Oxford County. He’s looking forward to the opportunity to connect directly with people during their time of need.

“You’re the frontline of healthcare. You’re the first one there, it means a lot to me,” he says. “If you’re the best part on their worst day, you’ve done your job.”