Author’s response to reviews

Title: Paramedics, poetry and film: health policy and systems research at the intersection of theory, art and practice

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Reviewer 1 comments

1.1 Thank you for the opportunity to review this paper. It is a fascinating Editorial that provides a unique insight into the world of paramedics working in a violent context. I found the poems very touching although I could not access the film. There is a lot to like about the work.

Author responses: Thank you for your thoughtful review and comments. Great to hear that you enjoyed the poems, and sorry that you were not able to access the poetry film. The online submission process does not allow for the uploading of files greater than 20MB, so although we included a link in the text itself, we were not able to upload the film itself as it exceeds the upload limit.

The film can be viewed at the following link: https://vimeo.com/304310322
1.2 Despite the positives, there are some limitations that could be addressed. Essentially more detail is required to fully explain the process and the impact. I found myself getting to end of the paper with many unanswered questions. The title says this is about health policy and systems research but neither of these came out strongly. How did this creative work influence policy? In what way was this contributing to research?

Author responses: Thanks for this feedback. In the field of Health Policy and Systems Research we see policy itself as essentially a set of ideas, sometimes but not always consolidated in formal written documents, and generated through a process. So we recognize that policy is influenced in a range of ways, some of which are difficult to assess. From this perspective research can and often does have ‘conceptual’ impacts, influencing the conversation about policy rather than being more directly translated into specific documents.

Given these perspectives – we feel that this form of engaged scholarship is influencing the policy conversation and the way we think about the issues of focus. In practice, the films and poetry have been used in a range of ways – in events acknowledging (and celebrating) Paramedics, in community screenings and public dialogues, and in a national symposium on EMS safety with senior decision makers. At the same time, these engagements are influencing the research process as it is unfolding, as they are affecting the questions we ask, and giving us a much greater understanding of the context influencing paramedics.

This work also forms part of a broader project with the Department of Health aimed at policy advocacy for EMS and safety of paramedics. The films and poetry are being used to start conversations about the complex issue of violence. These creative methods allow us to shift the narrative and create possibilities to think differently about the issue of violence by bringing on board the perspectives of many health system actors who are not always part of the conversation. So, for example, in the film screening and poetry performance mentioned, 200 residents from the Tafelsig neighbourhood attended and were in conversation with a number of Paramedics, the EMS director, some community activists, the ward counsellor etc.

We have included more discussion on how the work influences both policy and research in the editorial – thanks for this helpful feedback!

1.3 What was the impact of this work on the paramedic workforce? How did this work influence their experiences?

Author responses: Thanks for these questions. It is hard to know how this work impacts the workforce – but all the Paramedics involved have shared the films widely on social media, and have expressed that they really love the films. They have also reported a change in the way that
patients residing in Tafelsig are interacting with them. They were involved in the public dialogue and found engaging in those conversations very useful.

We have included some of these reflections in the “Imagining possibilities through poetry and film: what are the implications for health policy and systems research? “ section.

1.4 Some of this is mentioned at the top of page 2 (although the pages are not numbered) but it is limited. How were the poems shared?

Author responses: The poems we performed at a public dialogue, and then also form the basis of the poetry-film which has been shared widely on social media. We have made this clearer in the editorial – thanks for the feedback.

1.5 What did the stakeholders do with the stories? What will happen next?

Author responses: The poetry-film was used as part of a film session in a national EMS safety symposium. Attendees also requested copies of the films to use as part of Paramedic training.

Thanks for this comments – have amended the editorial so that it described this process more clearly. Thanks!

1.6 I am aware that this is an Editorial but a bit more is needed about the impact on the health workforce and how these creatives pieces may be used especially given the readership of this journal.

Author responses: Thanks for this comment – we have made changes in the “Imagining possibilities through poetry and film: what are the implications for health policy and systems research? “ section to address these points. However, the objective of the commentary was to report on the beginning of engaged scholarship using creative methods, we are not claiming to report on evaluation results.

Reviewer 2 comments

2.1 Thank you for the opportunity to review this fairly unique submission (in my experience) to HRH. The film footage is professionally presented, tells a moving story, and is interesting. It is helpful to have the written translation alongside it and on the footage.
Author responses: Thank-you for your careful consideration, and helpful feedback. (and glad you enjoyed the film!)

I read and watched this submission with a very open mind because I strongly support the use of narratives in creating meaning and messages, and am very interested in the use of multi-media to portray complex concepts. Very grateful that you took such an open approach to this work, and totally agree!

2.2 As it is presented, I don't think the submission makes the necessary translation from the narrative / story telling to an academic piece of work. The submission is primarily focused around the film and narrative, but it lacks the theoretical context and interpretation to move this into an academic domain. It is akin to having lots of results, without the background or methodology to support them.

Author responses: Thank you for this feedback, and we agree. The piece is not intended to be an academic piece of work in the traditional sense – but we did think it would be valuable to share the experience, which is why we submitted this as a commentary (editorial option), and not a research article.

As a commentary, following the guidelines on the BMC HRH website, it is envisaged it as a ‘short, narrowly focused article of contemporary interest’ and as such, it would not be expected to address some of your suggestions (which would apply if this was a research article).

This work forms part of a broader project with the Department of Health aimed at advocacy for EMS and safety of paramedics. The films and poetry are being used to start conversations about the complex issue of violence. These creative methods allow us to shift the narrative and create possibilities to think differently about the issue of violence bringing on board the perspectives of many health system actors who are not always part of the conversation. So, for example, in the film screening and poetry performance mentioned, 200 residents from the Tafelsig neighbourhood attended and were in conversation with a number of Paramedics, the EMS director, some community activists, the ward counsellor etc. At the moment, we are not formally evaluating this specific initiative, but it is informing a longer-term case-study research project currently being planned which will seek to engage with some of the issues so far highlighted. We felt it would be valuable to share the early experiences of our work and some of the initial learnings as a commentary, and to promote wider debate about the opportunities of using creative visual and artistic methods as a form of engaged health policy and systems research.

That said, many of these comments are also useful for the commentary – so thank you. We have taken some of these onboard, and provide details below.
2.3 I believe that the following are needed to move this from predominantly a creative / narrative work to an academic paper:

1. theoretical background and justification about the problem (the issues faced by paramedics)

2. theoretical background to justify the use of the multi-media / narrative approach, and to clarify what it is attempting to achieve, and for whom and a description of how this was achieved (basically a methodology)

3. ideally, some data to demonstrate the impact of the work on the intended audience/s. To a certain extent, this is intrinsic in the video (with the audience feedback), however this is not discussed in the paper.

4. Some discussion about the wider relevance of this work. For instance, how can this method and these findings be used to drive change / inform new approaches etc. How else have similar approaches been used and by whom (references). What is the original contribution that this piece is making?

5. given the visual footage, there are ethical issues that need to be addressed - both from the perspective of the participants (how was consent obtained, how is anonymity assured), but also from a viewer perspective - there are potentially upsetting scenes. How would the authors address this and alert viewers to potentially confronting content?

6. There is also the issue of potential bias in the presentation of footage. If this was a piece of qualitative research, the issues of selection bias and researcher reflexivity would be explicitly addressed. As this is a piece of narrative footage which is trying to tell a story, it is likely that footage and stories are selected to make specific points. These are very different approaches and some acknowledgement of the researcher position and objectivity (or otherwise) is necessary to clearly position this work.

Author responses: As mentioned above, this piece was intended as a commentary (not an academic research article) but where possible, we have taken some of these comments onboard for the commentary – so thanks for the helpful feedback!

1. We tried to describe both the issues of violence faced by Paramedics, and that these are societal issues facing everyone. In addition, instead of giving violence statistics, we chose to lead with an example of how Paramedics and their families are affected.

2. As mentioned earlier – we have no traditional research methodology to share at this stage, as we are not reporting on final research findings. This was intended as a commentary to share our experience of using creative approaches in enabling policy-relevant conversations and
informing the development of socially engaged research. However, based on this feedback we have included more about how we have used these creative methods in a “Imagining possibilities through poetry and film: what are the implications for health policy and systems research?” section so thanks for these comments.

3. Thanks, we have addressed this point in the “Imagining possibilities through poetry and film: what are the implications for health policy and systems research?” section.

4. Thanks, we have addressed this point in the “Imagining possibilities through poetry and film: what are the implications for health policy and systems research?” section.

5. This work was done as part of a documentary film and poetry project (not a research endeavor). For the film, informed consent and release forms were signed by participants. Anonymity was not assured – instead participants were told that the film may be screened in a range of settings, and consent was given for this.

6. Selection of stories were made based on the poems written. As this is a creative project meant to share the lived experiences of health care workers in an engaging way – we considered selection bias and reflexivity differently to how this would be done in a qualitative research project. Of primary significance for us is whether Paramedics felt the poems and films captured their experience appropriately. Continued engagement over time that has built trust into ongoing relationships allowed for an honest conversation regarding this. In the first film there were some editorial suggestions made by Paramedics. In the poetry and poetry film – the Paramedics involved (Moira and Abdul) provided feedback on the film, and felt their experience were appropriately captured. The films have been shared widely on social media by the Paramedics involved. In addition – given the collaborative nature of the project, several screening and discussion groups have been led by EMS and community groups, rather than being initiated by researchers. Furthermore, this work has been accepted at a poetry festival later in the year and the panel discussion will be with Paramedics, poets, policy makers and researchers.

2.4 For this submission to be successful, I believe that the written paper should be able to stand-alone as a theoretical paper with the support of the footage / narrative. I would be very interested to see these issues addressed because this potentially creates a new paradigm for communicating complex academic ideas (particularly of relevance to HRH). I appreciate that this is a relatively unusual methodology and approach, and this could be a seminal piece of work to help address / overcome / acknowledge some of those challenges.

Author responses: Thanks so much for these comments. Very helpful to take on board as we consider how we would structure this work if it was a research endeavour (in the classic sense). For now, as mentioned earlier, this is part of a broader advocacy project that is influencing both policy and research. We wanted to share our experience using these creative methods. That said,
PHD work by LB (the corresponding author) is a case-study focused on this issue and will seek to bring a theoretical research lens to this work in future.

We hope to have adequately addressed all your comments. This piece was envisaged as a commentary, and not a research article but we have taken on board your comments (where appropriate for a commentary) and have found them very helpful, so thanks! Also, great to get a reviewer that recognises that value of such approaches, and this is rare (in my experience) Thanks for the time you took to review this, much appreciated!