

# Ambulancemen ask to join the fire brigade 19.2

IN an effort to improve response times, ambulancemen yesterday called on the Legislative Council to drop non-emergency calls from the service and to introduce ambulance positions at fire stations.

They also repeated their demand for legislation to stop the public using ambulances as a free taxi service.

A Legco ad hoc group is considering a highly critical report by a group of independent consultants on the territory's ambulance service.

Chairman of the Hongkong Ambulancemen's Union, Mr Lee Wing Hong, said: "About 70 per cent of our calls are for emergency services.

"The 30 per cent of non-emergency calls should be dealt with by the charity organisation, the Hongkong Rehabilitation Service.

"They already do a lot of this sort of work and have said they would be willing to

do more ... they have the necessary equipment such as hydraulic jacks for lifting patients."

Mr Lee said that this would improve emergency services and be cost effective. He said a 1980 Government report estimated the cost of each ambulance journey averaged \$600 but last year it was estimated that the same trip by the rehabilitation service costs just \$21.

He said 1986 figures for ambulance journey costs were not available from management.

The independent report says that travelling time for emergency calls should not exceed 10 minutes in urban areas.

However, Mr Lee claimed yesterday that "90 per cent of emergency calls are achieved in 10 minutes".

He said, "We want to improve this to six minutes like the fire services and could do this by having ambulance points at all fire stations.

"At present there are ambulance points at only 21 of

the 52 fire stations." The ambulance service is run by the Fire Service Department and the report calls for better co-ordination between the two services.

Asked if these new ambulance points would involve more staff he said that the transfer of non-emergency cases to the rehabilitation service would probably release enough staff.

Two controversial points not included in the report were the issues of training and medical skills of ambulancemen.

Some doctors have said medical skills are sadly lacking in the ambulance service and that the medical attention received in the first seconds in the ambulance were crucial.

Mr Lee said: "We do not agree with these criticisms and the service provided is better than many places in Asia such as Singapore and Japan. We may not be the best but we are not the worst.

"The study could not consider these two issues be-

cause it was not in the terms of reference."

A controversial point arising in response to the report is the ambulancemen's claim that members of the public frequently use ambulances as taxis when they are not really ill.

Mr Lee said: "Under the existing ordinance people are allowed to use the ambulance on request to take them anywhere."

The union has claimed that there were 146 cases of such "taxi abuse" last year.

However, assistant chief ambulance officer, Mr Andrew Pang, has claimed that "there were only 13 reported cases of abuse in the past five years out of more than 1.65 million reports."

He said only three of the 13 proved genuine abuses.

Mr Lee responded yesterday: "The ordinance does not allow ambulance personnel to challenge the caller and management does not encourage ambulance personnel to report cases."