

Dufferin County's paramedic service celebrates 50 years with open house

By Brian Lockhart

It has been 50 years since Dufferin County's ambulance service was created, and during those decades there has been a lot of change in how it operates.

In 1968, an ambulance was pretty much just a way to get a sick or injured person to a hospital. Ambulance attendants may have had basic first aid, but not much more. In many municipalities they didn't even have benefit of taking a first aid course. They only needed to place a person on a stretcher and be able to drive.

The Dufferin County Paramedic Service hosted the public at its Blind Line base last Saturday, September 29, to celebrate the anniversary and provide people with information about what they do now.

The original ambulance service was located at Dufferin Area Hospital, now the Lord Dufferin Centre Retirement Residence. It was built in 1970.

Dufferin County Paramedic Chief Tom Reid has seen a lot of changes in his 36 years on the job. Well before he joined the Service, a ride in an ambulance meant you were just a passenger until you got to a hospital.

He pointed out a photo in an historic display of the first vehicle that was close to an ambulance in Shelburne, it was a converted Ford Model A outfitted with skis to allow the two doctors who owned it to make house calls to rural patients.

The county didn't get its first real ambulance until 1968. It was a converted van that was outfitted to transport patients but had very little, if any, life-saving equipment. Both Shelburne and Orangeville received an ambulance that year.

"Over the years we have been called everything from an ambulance driver to EMS, but now everything has been switched over to a Paramedic Service," Chief Reid explained. "Back then, they pretty much threw you in the back and drove you to the hospital. CPR (cardio-pulmonary resuscitation) didn't even come in until 1996."

Over the years, the medical community realized the importance of having highly skilled first responders who can make the difference between life and death at an accident scene or sudden health emergency.

"Our current location was opened in 2003," Chief Reid said. "We have advanced-care paramedics here. We bring a number of emergency drugs with us. We do diagnostic cardio now and defibrillation. We didn't have any of those tools at the beginning. It was more or less first aid and CPR after 1996. A lot of life-saving things are now done right at the scene. From my perspective a lot has changed. It's unbelievable the training and education of the paramedics have come a long way."

You hope you may never need them, but when an accident or health emergency occurs, having trained emergency service responders arrive means at the least, you're in good hands, and at the most, the difference between life and death.