



December 2008



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This past year has been a difficult one for those of us in the air medical industry. We have witnessed the loss of friends, colleagues, and patients in a number of air medical accidents. These accidents have also brought about an intense amount of scrutiny by the National Transportation Safety Bureau (NTSB) and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), as well as some of our national legislators. Flight For Life welcomes this attention as we hope that as an industry, it will improve safety nationwide.

Throughout 2008 there have been articles and “exposés” in local and national news outlets providing erroneous information to the public about the spike in the accident rate and factors contributing to this increase. This misinformation has created concern and anxiety among the general public as well as hospital and EMS providers regarding the use of air medical transport. Referring and receiving agencies are questioning whether it is really safe to fly patients. The purpose of this document is to provide accurate information about the accident rate, factors that have brought about changes in the air medical industry and NTSB recommendations as well as proposed regulatory changes.

Accident Data:

Ira Blumen, MD and his team from the University of Chicago Medical Center have published the most definitive helicopter EMS safety report to date. The report, first published in 2002, is an on-going analysis of safety in the air medical industry. The following information comes directly from the latest revision of the report through October 15, 2008:

- 2008 (thru October 15): 9 fatal accidents with 29 fatalities
- 1972-2008: 264 accidents, 98 of which had fatalities
- 1998-2008: 146 of the 36 year total occurred in the last 10 years (55% of total accidents)
- 51% of the accidents occur in daylight and 49% at night
- Probable causes for accidents:
 - Human Error 77%
 - ◆ Weather related
 - ◆ Collision with objects
 - Mechanical 17%
 - Undetermined 2%
- In a 29 year study by Dr. Blumen, of **4.3 million** patients flown, 34 died in helicopter EMS accidents resulting in a death rate of 0.76/100,000 patients flown. Conversely, according to the National Safety Council 2007 data, 1.2/100,000 patients each year die due to complications and misadventures of surgery and medical care.

www.flightforlife.org

FLIGHT FOR LIFE is a Transport System provided by the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center with bases in McHenry - Illinois, Waukesha/Milwaukee and Fond du Lac - Wisconsin
SYSTEM SPONSORS: Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, Froedtert Memorial Lutheran Hospital, Centegra Hospital McHenry

Air transportation provided by Air Methods

Changes in the air medical industry and healthcare:

55% of the total helicopter EMS accidents occurred in the last 10 years (1998-2008). There have been numerous changes within the air medical industry and healthcare since 1998. Some of those changes are as follows:

- Doubling in the number of air medical helicopters (nearly 700 according to Blumen)
- Increased number of patient flights
- Increased Medicare reimbursement for air medical transport
- Shift from the traditional hospital based helicopter program to the for-profit model
- Decline in the number of rural hospitals (including decline in specialty services at other hospitals such as Neurosurgery)
- Movement away from the Certificate of Need (CON) process for new helicopter bases
- Change in the emphasis of “Centers of Excellence” concept

NTSB Recommendations and Flight For Life’s Commitment to Safety:

While there is no one “silver bullet” that will solve the safety issues that the air medical industry is facing, there are a number of recommendations that the NTSB has made to address these concerns. As a point of clarification to the reader regarding the difference between the NTSB and the FAA: the NTSB investigates accidents, finds their causes and makes recommendations to prevent future accidents while the FAA is responsible for development of regulations and their enforcement.

It is important to learn from these accidents and to put into place safety-enhancing technology and initiatives that will lead to greater safety in the air medical industry. We certainly cannot remove all risk from what we do, but we can mitigate that risk while still providing air medical transport. Safety must remain our number one priority - this is our obligation to our patients, staff and the communities we serve.

Flight For Life met a number of the recommendations prior to the NTSB publishing their report in 2005, and is in the process of meeting the remainder of their latest recommendations as we transition into our new EC145 aircraft. Below, the latest recommendations are listed along with Flight For Life’s compliance to those recommendations:

Develop and implement flight-risk evaluation programs and training procedures, and consult with others trained in EMS flight operations when weather risks reach a predefined level. Formal Risk assessment is done by the Flight For Life pilot on each and every flight prior to lift-off. The pilots have the ability to confer with the other bases’ on-duty pilots concerning weather decisions as well our aviation vendor, Air Methods, operations center.

Use formalized dispatch and flight-following procedures that include up-to-date weather information and assistance in flight-risk assessment decisions. The Flight For Life Communications Center provides formalized dispatch and flight following along with up-to-the-minute computerized weather information by National Association of Air Communications Specialist (NAACS) certified personnel. We also utilize

satellite tracking on all three aircraft and our operator has the ability to monitor the aircraft with predefined parameters for intervention if deemed necessary.

Use increased weather-minimum and pilot-rest duty requirements on all medically staffed flights.

Flight For Life ceiling height and visibility minima already exceed the base minimums determined by the FAA. Duty pilots must adhere to CFR 14 FAR135.271 (b) duty requirements and are provided with an environmentally controlled quiet area where they can rest while on duty.

Install helicopter terrain awareness and warning systems and train flight crews to use them. Flight For Life will have the Enhanced Ground Proximity Warning System (next generation H-TAWS) in our new aircraft.

Flight For Life has also invested in a number of other safety enhancing technologies and initiatives that we feel are important to the safety of our transport service. They are listed below:

- Weather reporting via: on-board XM Weather, Flight Communications Center, Air Methods Operations Center
- Satellite tracking that is monitored by our Flight Communications Center and our aviation vendor's Operations Center
- Wire Strike Protection System (new aircraft)
- Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Systems (CAMTS) voluntary accreditation since 1996
- Flight For Life Safety Officer responsible for all three sites along with a multidisciplinary safety committee at each base
- Air Medical Resource Management (AMRM) training is required for all crew. It involves the principles of communication, decision-making and teamwork.
- Safety culture where the pilot determines whether it is safe to take the flight based on the weather but any of the crew on board the aircraft as well as the communications specialist have the ability and responsibility, with no adverse consequence, to terminate the flight if there is any question concerning the safety of the flight.
- Night Vision Goggles (new aircraft)
- Weather radar (new aircraft) to support future IFR flight
- Commitment to operate under Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) whenever possible (new aircraft)

Oversight and Change for the air medical industry:

What does the future hold for air medical transport? First and foremost there can be no more “business as usual” for our industry. The industry has tested the trust and faith that has been placed in us by those who have placed their patients in our care. Not only are the NTSB and the FAA scrutinizing HEMS, so are the local and national media, the public and our legislators in Washington. 2009 will bring greater oversight and change in how we operate. A brief summary of what is being done now is found below.

- The NTSB, FAA and other stakeholders met in Washington, DC in October at a forum sponsored by the Helicopter Association International (HAI) to address the current situation. From this meeting came a number of suggested FAA Operations Specification changes that will certainly be adopted in at the end of the comment period (early 2009). These changes involve flight planning and increased weather minimums. The FAA has determined that safety in air commerce and the public interest requires additional hazard mitigation for Helicopter EMS (HEMS) operations.
- The NTSB has called a special public hearing on air medical safety to be held in Washington, DC, February 3-5, 2009. Initial plans for the hearing call for the inclusion of witnesses and safety experts from the air medical community, including aviation operators, medical personnel, researchers, FAA officials, and state EMS officials. The topics range from aviation procedures to safety equipment, training practices and pilot experience, and issues created by competition and the financial reimbursement of air medical services. While it is possible that this hearing could result in further safety recommendations by the Board, the informational nature of this hearing is very different than the 2006 hearing, which did not include witness testimony or the availability of questions or comments from air medical professionals.

Conclusion:

The Flight For Life Transport System has provided 25 years of safe transport. The Mission Statement of Flight For Life states that we will provide safe, efficient, high quality, customer oriented patient care, transportation, and education. As an organization, it is paramount that Flight For Life maintain the faith and trust that consumers have placed in us. We must remain focused on doing what has helped us to remain safe while, at the same time, continually review and revise our process of doing business in order to maintain that position.

Flight For Life is concerned that misinformation rampant in our service area is leading to unfounded anxiety regarding the decision to choose air medical transport for critically ill and injured patients. The intent of this document is to provide accurate and factual information about safety within the air medical industry, as well as highlight what Flight For Life does to ensure safety within our own organization. Every mode of patient transport comes with a certain amount of risk to the patient and the crew. When humans and machines are involved, things can go wrong, regardless of the type of transport vehicle. What we can say is that we are dedicated to doing everything possible to mitigate risk in the transport environment for the safety of the patient, our crews and the communities we serve.

FLIGHT FOR LIFE Transport System