

Flying ambulance pays goodwill visit to Huronia hospitals



Kicking up dust
In a cloud of dust that had most onlookers turning their faces away or seeking shelter, the Ministry of Health's air ambulance helicopter landed at Huronia District Hospital Wednesday afternoon. It flew to the area on a public information mission, acquainting local medical personnel and ambulance officials with the proper procedures to follow in an air ambulance shuttle situation. Staff photo

by Dave Wilson
All of us have seen ambulances. Some of us have even had them whisk us to hospital when - for whatever reason - we were feeling a little less than the picture of health.
It would not be too unreasonable to suggest, however, that few of us have seen an ambulance that looks like a white and yellow polywag, sounds like a giant mixer, and kicks up so much dust when it arrives at its destination that even the most steel-throated of people would have a tough time suppressing a cough or two.
It may not sound too clinical, but in fact it's the most modern, efficient, and best equipped way of transporting persons in need of specialized treatment from outlying areas to urban hospitals.
It's Ontario's Air Ambulance service, initiated last October as a pilot project for one year, and Wednesday afternoon, hospital administrators, doctors, nursing staff, and ambulance attendants from Midland and Penetanguishene all had an opportunity to see first hand the machine that is the mainstay of the program, and to learn the techniques necessary to making it work as a saver of lives.
At about 1:00 p.m., the white and yellow Bell 212 helicopter air ambulance touched down behind Penetanguishene General Hospital on the first leg of its day-long public exposure trip to Huronia. An hour later, it took off, and made a short hop over to Huronia District Hospital, performing the first landing ever on hospital property.
In both instances, people involved in the various stages of an air ambulance patient shuttle were given explanations of the helicopter's medical facilities, and were shown the proper ways of performing their respective duties in an air ambulance shuttle situation.
They learned from Ministry of Health official Ken Shewry and helicopter attendant Pat O'Connor that the air ambulance is, essentially, an airborne emergency room. The Bell 212, as outfitted for the Ministry of Health, carries two pilots and two attendants, and is capable of transporting two doctors and up to six disaster victims.

The helicopter has a two hour fuel range, meaning it can service hospitals generally within a 100 mile radius of Toronto. It was pointed out, however, that if there is an emergency outside the ambulance's fuel range, fuel caches have been placed at strategic points across the province, enabling longer trips. The helicopter although still essentially in the testing phase, makes an average of two emergency trips during its daily operational hours of 12 noon to 12 o'clock midnight.
An emergency run for the ambulance actually begins at the hospital where the patient is being treated. If the attending physician determines that the patient needs treatment not available at the outlying hospital, he can contact the ambulance dispatching centre at Concord, on the northern fringes of Toronto, and request the helicopter. The air ambulance can also be requested by local ground ambulance officials if the patient is situated in an inaccessible area, or if ground ambulance vehicles are all in use when the emergency call is received.
The decision to send the helicopter rests with the dispatcher, who after consulting with the physician, checking weather conditions, and ensuring that the air ambulance is available, either grants or denies the request.
If the request is granted, the air crew and attendants waiting at Buttonville airport are notified, and in three minutes, the helicopter is in the air.
In the meantime, the dispatcher contacts local police, ambulance and hospital personnel, instructing the latter to stabilize the patient for transportation.
In the airborne stage of the shuttle, it is the ground ambulance crew that plays an all important role. The crew is required to prepare a suitable landing site on or near hospital property, and must ensure that there are no obstructions, such as wires, loose garbage, or oddly enough, children playing with kites. Ground ambulance crews must also ensure that onlookers are kept away from the landing area.
The ground crew is required to have an ambulance waiting for the helicopter when it lands, to transport attendants to the hospital, and to return to the 'copter with the patient, and the attending physician after the

patient has been readied for the flight.
Once all are secured inside and the patient has been attached to whatever equipment is necessary, the helicopter lifts off and makes its way to either Sick Children's or Toronto General Hospital.
An average flight from Midland to Toronto takes about 30 minutes, the air ambulance officials explained. The cost for the round trip would be \$185, which covers the fuel used by the helicopter's twin turbine engines.
The cost of the flight to the patient would be the same as that in a more earthbound ambulance - between five and ten dollars.
The Ministry of Health officials contended that in many cases, the air ambulance is a more economical method of transporting a patient than a ground ambulance. A ground ambulance trip to Toronto ties up a vehicle crew for about four hours, costing money all the way, and in extreme emergencies, heightens the risk to the patient's life, upon which no price tag can be attached.
The air ambulance has flown to Huronia District Hospital four times since last October, and to Penetanguishene General once. HDH administrator Ted Pritchard thinks the program is a good one.
"For the number of times we've had to use it up here, it's been extremely worthwhile," he commented.
Ambulance operator Steve Laurin, who has participated in several shuttles, agreed.
"We've had a few communication problems with the first flights," he said, "but after seeing the films and talking to the attendants today, I think it's made it clear to the doctors and nurses who and when to call."



Medical centre
Air ambulance attendants call the helicopter a flying emergency room, and those who had an opportunity to see its facilities first hand would be quick to agree. The helicopter is capable of carrying two pilots, two attendants, two doctors, and up to six disaster patients. Staff photo



Curiosity
The Ministry of Health air ambulance not only piqued the curiosity of medical personnel, but also that of scores of interested citizens whose tax dollars pay for year long pilot project. Each trip the helicopter makes costs about \$185, and total operating costs for a year amount to \$800,000. Staff photo



Acquainted
One of the reasons the air ambulance visited Penetanguishene General and Huronia District Hospitals Wednesday was to acquaint the various authorities who are involved in a rescue mission with the duties required of them. Police play an important role in a shuttle, and officers of the Midland OPP and Huronia District Hospital were on hand to get instructions. Staff photo

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