

CE II Navigating the World of Air Ambulance

By Denise Waye

On any given day, there are dozens of life-saving medevac flights being performed as patients are transported throughout various domestic and international destinations. While many case managers are familiar with patients transported by helicopter, or short-range aircraft, the subject of this article targets fixed wing, long range jet transports.

At some point in their career, a case manager will most likely be involved in setting up an air ambulance transport for their patient. This article will provide information for the case manager in how to choose a reputable air ambulance provider and help their patients make the best decision while avoiding some common snares prevalent in the air ambulance industry.

What Is an Air Ambulance?

An air ambulance is a medically configured aircraft equipped with specialized equipment including a stretcher, monitoring equipment, pumps and ventilators as well as a variety of medications that allow the medical flight crew to care for a patient in an ICU setting. The medical team typically consists of a critical care nurse and a paramedic or respiratory therapist. Utilizing a dual medical flight crew configuration provides optimum safety and care for the patient.

Medical flight crews are some of

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the most highly specialized health care providers in the industry due to the amount of autonomy that is required during the flight. Working as a medical flight crew member on board an air ambulance requires at least 3 years of critical care experience. The flight crew must also possess unique skills, including superior critical thinking and assessment skills, along with the ability to adapt, improvise and overcome most all situations. Medical crew members receive specialized training in air medical transport including emergency life saving measures, flight physiology, aircraft safety and awareness as well as emergency egress.

Types of Air Ambulance Aircraft

There are a variety of aircraft utilized in the air ambulance industry. Fixed wing aircraft are categorized by the types of engines they have. There are piston aircraft, turbo prop and turbine powered jet aircraft.

Piston aircraft fly at lower altitudes and are fairly cheap to operate. They are typically utilized for short range, intrastate missions as they have limited load carrying capabilities, air speeds of under 300 mph with altitudes in the mid-20,000 range. Examples of piston aircraft utilized as air ambulances are Cessna 414s and 441s.

Other aircraft utilized are Turbo props. These types of aircraft can be utilized for both intra and close interstate transports. Turbo props can fly farther than piston aircraft and have speeds up to 400 mph with altitudes in the mid to lower 30,000 range. Examples of turbo prop aircraft are

King Air and Pilatus aircraft.

While piston and turbo prop aircraft are fine for short range transports, they are not appropriate for long range patient transports over longer ranges as they will have to make multiple fuel stops. This can affect an already medically compromised patient.

For patients needing long range transports over 200 miles, jets are the aircraft of choice. Commonly utilized jets are Learjets and Citation aircraft. Learjets have the fastest speed of all. With speeds up to 500 miles per hour and flight at levels of 41,000 to 43,000 feet. Learjets are the most common jet aircraft utilized as air ambulances. They are an extremely effective way to transport patients quickly and efficiently.

How to Choose an Air Ambulance Provider

Choosing an air ambulance provider can be a daunting task compounded by a sense of urgency, emotions on the part of family members as well as possible logistical issues. Thankfully, the advent of the internet with its powerful search engines has made this task much easier to ensure you are getting a reputable air ambulance provider. Easy- right? Wrong!

Your search may lead you to an air ambulance broker who portrays themselves as an actual air ambulance operator with websites showing images of aircraft and making promises of providing their "own" aircraft, medical staff and flight crew, when in reality they simply broker these requests while charging hidden additional fees.

The services of a broker can save

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precious time and may boast valuable first-hand expertise, but be aware there are potential pitfalls of using brokers and the fact that perception doesn't always reflect reality.

Knowledge is power and knowing the following key points will help identify whether you have contacted a broker or an actual air ambulance provider.

How to Identify a Broker

1. If a website has images of aircraft on it, check if the aircraft tail numbers correspond to the model of aircraft and in turn the company purporting to operate or fly that aircraft. This information can be found on www.faa.org. Be cautious of aircraft on websites with no tail numbers. Photoshop is a powerful tool.
2. Ask for a copy of the air ambulance provider's "DO85." This operations specification lists the aircraft the company is authorized to operate. If the picture on the website does not match the DO85, then it is not their aircraft.
3. Caution should be urged where the wording on an air ambulance company's website is ambiguous—"We have access to Learjet 35 aircraft" is far removed from "We own and operate Learjet 35 aircraft."
4. Search engine optimization (SEO) is another one to be aware of. Typing in "air ambulance" into an Internet search engine can show results of companies that are more expert at engineering websites to achieve high rankings than they are at providing air ambulance flights. If you have any doubt about who exactly is behind the company's website you are looking at, it may be revealing to check the domain name registration service to see who owns the site.
5. The company should have a physical mailing address rather than just an

anonymous P.O. Box and have local/geographic phone numbers, not just a toll-free number.

6. Is there a copy of the Air Operator Certificate available on the company's website? If not, ask for a copy to be sent to you. No company can operate aircraft without this certificate, typically known in the industry as a Part 135 Certificate.

Brokers may offer a valuable service for those who have never booked an air ambulance service, but be aware of the potential for being misled by those who's focus lie in profit- not patient care.

Doing your due diligence will enhance your chances of success in choosing a reputable air ambulance provider who owns and operates their own aircraft while having the necessary experience to provide safe patient care during transport.

Ask the Right Questions

Once you have vetted you are dealing directly with an air ambulance provider and not a broker, asking the right questions that are listed below will help ensure you are working with a reputable air ambulance service as not all services are equal!

Accreditations

Is the air ambulance service accredited? This is a yes or no answer. Some companies who are not accredited may state they "follow accreditation standards." Then, if they "follow the standards," why are they not accredited? It takes time and energy to obtain and maintain an accreditation.

Choosing an accredited provider ensures the air ambulance provider has met industry standards set out by the accreditation service. Additionally, if there are any significant problems during the transport, issues can be referred to the accrediting organization where they will hold the program accountable.

There are three accrediting

organizations that are common in the industry. They are listed in order of length of time they have been in the industry.

1. The Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Systems (CAMTS)
2. The European Air Medical Institute (EURAMI)
3. National Accreditation Alliance Transport Applications (NAAMTA)

If the air ambulance service state they are accredited, trust but verify the accreditation by checking the website of the accrediting organization.

Although these accrediting organizations do not have regulatory authority, they provide a voluntary means by which air ambulance providers adhere to the highest standards and level of patient care.

135 Operating Certificate

Does the service have a 135 Operating Certificate? Air ambulance providers must have a Part 135 Certificate in order to transport patients. This is an important question that must be answered before the company is contracted.

All 135 Operators must adhere to FAA requirements, including pilot time and duty requirements and subsequent rest requirements. Pilots can only fly 10 hours in a 14-hour duty day with mandatory rest requirement of 10 hours. Unfortunately, some providers do not follow these requirements. Not following this standard as well as other FAA requirements can have a significant impact on the safety of the operation.

Location of the Air Ambulance Provider

Where is the air ambulance service located? Some states have little or no regulations for air ambulance companies where other states are highly regulated. Those states with no regulations tend to attract brokers and questionable air ambulance companies. These states may require minimal equipment and may have only one medical person

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on board. Ask how many medical crew members as well as pilots will be on board during the transport. The correct answer is two medical crew members and two pilots.

Safety

Has the air ambulance service had any accidents or incidents? This is a yes or no question. Safety is paramount when transporting patients. Don't let the operator tap dance around this significant safety question. If you receive vague answers, you can do your own research provided by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). The NTSB provides an aviation accident database containing information on aviation accidents dating all the way back to 1962. Case managers can check out the name of any air ambulance service under their operating certificate via the following link: www.nts.gov/layouts/ntsb.aviation/index.aspx.

Even if a company has never had an accident, be suspicious of companies who have had several incidents. There may be a basic flaw in the company's quality management. Companies who utilize safety features such as loading ramps and wide cargo doors provide a safer environment for the patient.

Who Pays for the Air Ambulance Transport?

Who pays for an air ambulance transport depends on the situation. Insurance might pay for flights that are medically necessary in order for a patient to go to a higher level of care. If a patient is injured or becomes ill while away from home and has a travel insurance plan, their flight will be covered by their travel assistance

company. If insurance does not cover the flight, and the patient does not have travel insurance, then the patient will have to pay out of pocket.

Patients who have to pay out of pocket for an air ambulance transport may fall prey to air ambulance services who insist the patient will not have to pay a cent for their transport and the patient's insurance will cover the cost of the flight. Beware of these companies who prey on desperate patients wanting to be transported home at a low cost.

Air Ambulance Considerations

Air ambulance flights are an expensive undertaking. This is due to fuel costs, maintenance, pilot training costs, and a multitude of insurance costs. It is tempting to find the lowest cost air ambulance. While everyone loves a bargain, there could be an underlying ominous reason an air ambulance service might give a rock bottom price, including skimping on maintenance practices or training.

Insurance

Dealing with insurance companies to facilitate an air ambulance transport can be very time consuming for the case manager. If not done correctly, valuable time will be lost, patients not transferred in a timely manner and possible denial of the claim. This could result in the patient being held responsible for the cost of the entire transport or being balance billed by the service who did the transport. Following the proper procedures set out by the insurance company is essential to avoid any balance billing to the patient.

When working with the insurance

company, there are three levels of transport that need to be understood. Emergent, Urgent, and Non Emergent (Routine). By understanding the different levels of transport, the case manager can relay transport expectations to the patient and family member. This will help decrease potential frustrations for all parties involved.

An emergent transport is an emergency transport where life or limb is at stake. The patient is in imminent need of a transport. Without the transport, the patient is at a high risk of severe consequences, including death. Insurance companies do not require a prior authorization for truly emergent transports.

The word "emergent" is a commonly misused term coined by some hospital staff to facilitate a quicker transfer. Interestingly, insurance companies state they see a higher level of "emergent" requests on a Friday afternoon. If the wrong decision is made to transport the patient emergently when the transport is in reality non emergent, the insurance company can deny the claim.

An urgent transport is a transport that is needed urgently but not necessarily emergently. The patient can wait a short time (several days) for a timely transport. However, the transport might soon become an emergent transport. A prior authorization is needed from the insurance company.

Nonemergent transports (routine) is where the patient can wait for a scheduled transport. Nonemergent transports also require a prior authorization. These transports might take as long as a week to facilitate as they must go

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The case manager can be a valuable resource in being an objective third party by reading the contract and ensuring everyone understands exactly what the contract states before it is signed.

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through the insurance company's internal review process.

It is important the case manager clearly states what type of transport is required to the insurance company. Upgrading the urgency of the transport merely for convenience of the hospital or physician, could result in denial of the claim. The case manager can be a huge resource in educating physicians regarding insurance procedures to avoid denial of claims and balance billing of the patient.

Contracts

Beware of companies who send long contracts to the patient and family member. Some air ambulance services prey on the fact that family members are distraught. They count on the fact the contract will not be read in its entirety. During time of stress, patients and family members may not thoroughly read through contracts as they believe the air ambulance service would never mislead them. Many times the family and patient are not signing for what they think they are signing. Some air ambulance services might state a low price for the transport at the beginning of the contract, only to state the low price is merely a retainer farther back in the contract. Beware of the fine print.

The case manager can be a valuable resource in being an objective third party by reading the contract and ensuring everyone understands exactly what the contract states before it is signed. Don't be afraid to ask the air ambulance

service hard questions to avoid much larger charges after the transport.

The Air Ambulance Transport: How it Works

Transporting a patient is a collaborative effort between the case manager, patient and physician. Before the transport, patients must be deemed fit to fly by the sending physician. Physicians should understand that air ambulance crews are highly trained in critical care transports and understand how flight physiology can affect the patient. Medical flight crews can handle the most critical transports.

The case manager will play an important role in the organization of the transfer. As such, it is important to understand the mechanics of the air ambulance transfer process in order to facilitate a smooth transport of the patient as well as continuity of care. Once the patient has been accepted by a physician at the receiving facility and a bed has been obtained, the next step will be to coordinate the transfer with the air ambulance service.

In order to facilitate the transfer, the case manager will need to provide the following information to the air ambulances' dispatch center to ensure a smooth patient transport:

Patient Information

1. Patient name
2. Diagnosis
3. Date of birth
4. Patient weight. Some air ambulance companies transport bariatric patients. If the patient is over 350 lbs, measure the girth of the patient

around the largest portion of the body and provide this measurement to the air ambulance service to make sure the patient can fit through their door. Make sure to ask the air ambulance provider if they transport bariatric patients.

5. Name and address of the sending facility
6. Patient's room number at the sending facility
7. The nurse's station's number. This is so the flight nurse can call report.
8. Name and address of the destination facility
9. Phone number at the destination facility

Passenger Information

1. Name
2. DOB
3. Weight

Family members can be a comfort for the patient. Most air ambulance providers allow at least one family member to accompany the patient. If the patient is stable and the air ambulance service refuses to allow a family member to accompany the patient, choose another provider.

Luggage

Medical equipment takes up most of the space in the luggage compartment of an air ambulance aircraft, as the main concern is having all medical resources available in order to take care of the patient's condition. This in turn will limit the amount of space available for the patients' personal luggage.

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Typically only one small carry-on size of luggage is allowed for the patient and family member. If the patient has a large amount of luggage, the case manager will need to help the family ship any extra luggage to their destination.

Patient Transfer Guidelines

The flight crew will need pertinent patient information as well. The case manager should prepare a packet that provides the medical team with patient information including a face sheet, a current history and physical which includes a discharge summary, current labs, as well as current medications.

Before the transport, the nurse from the air ambulance company will call for patient report to ensure the patient is fit to fly. Expect bedside to bedside care from the flight team to

ensure continuity of care.

When the flight crew arrives at bedside, they will perform a patient assessment and transfer the patient to their equipment. The case manager can ensure the bedside nurse has prepared the patient for transport by making sure the patient has at least peripheral IV access as well as a Foley if appropriate for the patient. Any tube feeds need to be discontinued approximately four hours prior to transport to prevent abdominal distention due to altitude changes.

The bedside nurse needs to identify any scheduled medications that will be given during the transport and provide these to the flight crew. If the patient is on a ventilator, a current set of arterial blood gases are optimal.

For loop closure, during the transport, the air ambulance service should provide notifications to all parties when the patient arrives safely at the receiving facility.

In summary, case managers can do

what is right by their patient by being a valuable and objective resource in helping patients and families navigate the world of air ambulance. Doing the proper due diligence in helping the patient make the best decision in choosing an air ambulance service will ensure the patient is safely transported with the highest standards of care. **CE II**

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