

Searching For the "Silver Bullet For Safety" in Helicopter Air Medical Service Operations

This article is a follow up to my last, which attempted to identify whether there indeed exists within the Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) community, a crisis in safety, or whether that is just the perception, and to identify a number of efforts by various entities to enhance safety in HEMS operations. Since my last article was written, several things have occurred that continue the focus on safety within air medical operations.

First, after consultation with HAI and the air medical industry, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), on January 28, 2005, issued Notice 8000.293 "Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) Operations," to provide guidance to Principle Inspectors (PI) regarding HEMS operators for whom they have oversight responsibilities. The Notice also contains information that PIs can provide to HEMS operators for a review of pilot and mechanic decision-making skills, procedural adherence, and crew resource management (CRM). Secondly, the Aeromedical Working Group of the FAA/Industry's Aviation Rulemaking Committee (ARC) chartered to revise Part 135 and, to some degree, Part 91 of the Federal Aviation Regulations (FAR), has recommended raising the day and night visibility requirements for Visual Flight Regulations (VFR) flight in Class G airspace for all HEMS operations. To its credit, the FAA, listed in its Notice a number of recommendations, rather than mandates, that it believes will promote safety within the air medical community. The increase in visibility requirements currently is just a recommendation, but it has been accepted by the Steering

Committee of the Part 135 ARC and likely will become a formal recommendation to the FAA in the committee's final report.

FAA Notice 8000.293 makes numerous recommendations to the air medical community. Most of these focus on training and equipment. If HEMS operators are serious about taking steps to improve their safety culture, they are strongly encouraged to review this Notice as it applies to their current safety programs. In many respects, the recommendations contained therein mirror those that were delineated in the Final Report of the Air Medical Service (AMS) Accident Analysis published in September 2001, following the Air Medical Safety Summit in Dallas, Texas. Much emphasis in both the new HEMS Notice and the earlier AMS accident analysis is placed on training.

Recommended training focuses on virtually every individual who influences the conduct of HEMS flight operations, from pilots, maintenance personnel, and other flight crewmembers, to supervisors and managers. To accomplish an effective training program, it takes commitment from top echelons down to the where the "rubber meets the road": the pilots and crew that fly the aircraft, the maintenance personnel who keep the aircraft airworthy, the dispatchers who launch the aircraft, and the program managers who set the standards and procedures for flight operations. It includes training that emphasizes operations in both instrument and marginal weather conditions, night operations, mountain operations, mission specific training, and aeronautical decision-making. Training should also be directed

toward managers who must understand the safety implications of the supervisory decisions they make.

The time has passed when the industry can sit back and say that we already have sufficient training programs in place. The statistics just are not bearing that out. This is not just a problem for the small operator that may not have the resources for extensive programs. The air medical accidents that are happening, are occurring with large and small operators alike. It is not a single engine versus multi-engine problem, and it is not a VFR versus an Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) operations problem. Everyone, I say again with emphasis, everyone involved in the conduct of air medical flight operations must be committed to strengthening the safety culture. Without that culture, "safety" becomes just lip service. Each CEO, General Manager, Director of Operations, Chief Pilot, and Safety Manager must be dedicated to his or her organization's safety culture and proactively support effective training. Ask yourselves, how often does your organization's senior management personally address pilots, crewmembers, and mechanics to emphasize the importance of, and dedication to, safety?

I challenge each organization, from single ship operators to those with several hundred aircraft, to conduct a comprehensive review of your existing training program to determine if training adequately encompasses the scope of your operations! Training must include acquisition training for newly hired personnel, recurrent training to maintain proficiency in all anticipated flight regimes, and mission-specific training designed

and tailored for your particular area of operations. If your operations require landing in remote areas, your training should also reach out to those entities that prepare and secure those areas!

There are a multitude of tools available not just for the Safety Manager, but for everyone up and down the chain of command to use in building a robust safety program. The FAA has produced a variety of programs to enhance safety, particularly on the subject of HEMS operations and aeronautical decision-making. Does your Director of Operations, Chief Pilot, or Safety Manager have a direct relationship with the FAA's Operations and Safety Program Support Branch (AFS-820)? This is one branch within the FAA that truly means it when it says, "We are here to help!" When was the last time this office was contacted by your organization to cultivate such a relationship, and to discuss what they might have to offer for your program?

There are numerous other resources to enhance your safety program. HAI makes available a significant number of products intended to enhance your safety programs, including a number of training videos on aeronautical decision-making, one specifically tailored to air medical operations, and yet another video on the subject of landing zone safety. Does your program have copies? HAI also sponsors a variety of safety courses in its educational series during HELI-EXPO, such as courses on Safety Management, Safety Leadership, Flying In The Wire Environment, Pilot Human Factors In Aviation Safety, Basic Mountain Flying Ground School, Emergency Response Preparedness, and Human Performance In Helicopter Maintenance. In addition, HAI conducts a Chief Pilot's Workshop, which in the future may be expanded to a full-fledged course. These are safety-oriented training courses focused on all those individuals who influence the

conduct of flight operations. This educational series could significantly enhance the training for HEMS operators.

So, has your organization's Safety Manager, Chief Pilot, Director of Operations, or Director of Maintenance attended one or more of these courses? Training, however, entails so much more than just courses. It must be a daily, ongoing process that involves everyone. How much opportunity is provided in your organization to pilots, crewmembers, and maintenance personnel to hone their skills on a daily basis, or do they operate only with the "bottom line" in mind? Might it be time for some introspective analysis of your organization's training program?

In addition to training, however, the FAA's HEMS Notice, as well as the AMS Accident Analysis, also strongly recommend aircraft equipment that would enhance safety for air medical operations. Terrain

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