

August 12, 2008

Dear

It has come to the attention of this office that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has identified "helicopter shopping" as a contributing factor in several fatal helicopter EMS (HEMS) accidents. We are asking that you share the information in this correspondence with your physicians and clinical staff.

Helicopter shopping is the practice of requestors calling air ambulance providers one after another in an attempt to find one who will fly in marginal weather conditions, without notification of prior refusals by other air ambulance providers. This is a potentially dangerous practice.

At the time your staff requests a helicopter transport, Missouri air ambulance providers will be asking if any other helicopters have been requested to respond to your hospital for this patient transfer. If an air ambulance provider has previously declined your flight request because of weather conditions, it is incumbent upon your staff to advise all subsequent providers of the previous flight refusals. Your staff's accurate response to this question will assist the pilot in making an appropriate, informed and safe assessment of the flight request.

On a related note, the air ambulance programs will also be asking if there are other helicopters en route to or at your hospital. With the increase of time critical diagnoses and the increase in helicopters available for transport, there is often more than one helicopter needing the helipad at the same time. Accurate information will allow the pilots to communicate effectively, therefore enhancing safety at your hospital landing area.

Air ambulances are invaluable for patients who have time sensitive conditions or need critical interventions, but they are not risk free. Air ambulance transports should be considered when patients need rapid transport with a critical care team in attendance.

This office is asking that your hospital develop a procedure that will ensure that a requested air ambulance service is notified whenever they are being requested to respond to a call that has been previously refused or aborted by another air ambulance service(s) due to unfavorable weather conditions. Additionally, please instruct your staff to inform helicopter programs when other helicopters are en route to or at your hospital.

Thanks you for your prompt consideration of this matter. Please contact our office for assistance identifying resources or if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Paula Kempf, RN
Director, Bureau of EMS