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# Air Medical Journal

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Ask the CAMTS

## Back to Basics



In the 1980s, helicopter medical transport services were just beginning to develop. By 1990, the year the Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Systems (CAMTS) incorporated, there were approximately 200 services across the United States compared with over 1,200 helicopters operating today. In those early days, groups like the American Society of Hospital-Based Emergency Air Medical Services (now the Association of Air Medical Services), the National Flight Nurses Association (now the Air & Surface Transport Nurses Association), and the National Flight Paramedics Association (now the International Association of Flight & Critical Care Paramedics) were just evolving and starting to develop guidelines for patient care during transport that included operational issues not found in other areas of medical transport. As CAMTS developed, we studied the accidents and incidents to create standards that would address the practices that were common to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB)'s probable causes of helicopter emergency service accidents.

Today, we have a whole new generation of medical and aviation professionals who have the advantage of time-tested standards and technology that were not found 30+ years ago such as night vision goggles, satellite tracking, glass cockpits, simulators, improved weather reporting, etc. However, with this new generation of pilots and medical crews, we are seeing some of the same unsafe practices that led to accidents in the 1980s. This may be because they are not aware of the dangers that caused so many accidents in the past. In this article, we emphasize the following issues that have also been highlighted by the NTSB.

### Helicopter Shopping Is Dangerous!

Helicopter shopping is still happening and even more dangerous in this highly

competitive era. It is 1 of the reasons the Federal Aviation Administration has operational control regulations and there are standards that address helicopter shopping. If a flight is turned down for weather or unsafe conditions, it is important to inform any other providers considering the flight. It is also important to respect the decision in the interest of safety. Marketing strategies that promise your service is better because "we" respond when other services deny a request because of weather minimums is an unacceptable

and dangerous practice. Many requesting agents, including some hospitals, are desperate to get the patient to a higher level of care but do not understand the complexities and risks of the aviation environment.

The CAMTS office has a "Hazards of Helicopter Shopping" video that is several years old but is still pertinent. It can be provided free of charge. Contact [admin@camts.org](mailto:admin@camts.org).

### Fatigue

We know fatigue leads to errors that humans make more often when tired. Not only are crews and patients at risk when the pilot is fatigued, but also medical errors can be life ending. Pilots have duty time regulations, but it is difficult to regulate sleep habits on off-duty time. Medical crews are more frequently scheduled 24-, 36-, and 48-hour shifts. Unless downtime is planned, emergency services must be available 24/7 so there is no guarantee how much sleep they will get. "Reducing fatigue-related accidents" was on the NTSB's 2019-2020 Most Wanted List (see [www.nts.gov](http://www.nts.gov)).

### Distractions

Fatigue is especially important today because we are all bombarded with distractions that were not present even 15 years ago. Cell phones may provide temptation

to send a brief text when the crew's full attention should be on flying and assisting the pilot in looking for obstructions. Drones, laser, and bird strikes are more and more prevalent and can be deadly. Another safety recommendation on that NTSB list was "eliminate distractions." This means we must be alert and situationally aware of those potential hazards.

### Train to Proficiency

Training is critical to safety of flight. It is important to ensure all pilots are trained to proficiency on sophisticated technology (glass cockpit), night vision goggles, instrument flight procedures in the event of inadvertent weather, mountain flying, or cold weather operations. Pilots should be trained to fly the specific aircraft assigned including enhanced technology. They should also be trained to the specific mission, location (including terrain and unique weather), and the instrument procedures required to get safely return from an encounter with reduced or no visibility.

### So, Let's Get Back to Basics!

1. Take care of yourselves and each other
2. Proper rest, diet, and exercise
3. Don't take shortcuts, do the preflights, do the walk-arounds
4. Use the checklists
5. Stay proficient
6. Speak up—ask questions; if you see something, say something
7. Stay alert—stay alive!

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