



BC Air Ambulance Service

Teamwork at its finest

| BY WARREN BROCK

While most people aren't aware of their existence until themselves or someone close requires their help, this team of dedicated professionals provides an essential medical service for the entire province of British Columbia. The BC Ambulance Service (BCAS) Air Ambulance program provides critical transportation links between hospitals and referral centres for patients requiring a higher level of care.

The Air Ambulance program employs highly skilled, specially trained emergency medical personnel including Advanced Care Paramedics specializing in Adult Critical Care and Child and Maternal Critical Care. Additionally, they contract the services of aviation companies who supply aircraft, pilots and aircraft engineers for these life saving missions. The pilots who are highly experienced, fly both day and night in varying and challenging weather conditions. "The Air Ambulance program was developed to maximize the availability of specialized physicians and treatment centres by efficiently moving patients throughout the province," says Kelowna Airevac Unit Chief Grant LeBlanc.

BCAS currently operates 3 flight centres

with one located at Kelowna International Airport (YLW) and the others in Vancouver and Prince George. The BCAS fleet consists of 6 fixed wing planes (2 turboprops and 1 jet based in Vancouver, 2 turboprops based at YLW and 1 turboprop based in Prince George), and 3 helicopters (2 based in Vancouver and 1 in Prince Rupert). BCAS also utilizes approximately 40 charter carriers across BC.

The BCAS Air Ambulance program is operated on a 24/7/365 basis with its operations centre known as the Provincial Air Ambulance Coordination Center (PAACC) located in Victoria. Last year, the PAACC received 8,673 calls for air ambulance service and coordinated the entire fleet of air ambulance transport teams that flew an amazing 2,507,497 fixed wing miles and 2,421 rotary hours. The program is the second busiest in North America and one of the busiest programs in the world.

Once a call comes into the command centre, the dispatcher sets in motion a well-coordinated action plan to ensure each case is handled in the most safe and effective manner. The sheer number of players and factors involved in each transport can be daunting, but the level

of teamwork between the BCAS, BC Health Authorities, air service providers, hospitals, and airports is next to none. The BCAS upholds the highest quality control protocols and procedures to ensure each patient receives the utmost care.

To give you an example, here is a brief overview of the steps and players involved in a routine BCAS Air Ambulance transport:

- 1** Call or fax received by the PAACC, the coordination centre.
- 2** PAACC consults two Transport Advisory groups: the Non Critical Care group determines the priority of the call and the Critical Care group develops a patient care plan, in conjunction with the transport team including any pertinent transport instructions for the team and applicable medications.
- 3** BC Bedline, a provincial bed management system, determines the availability of beds at a referral hospital/centre and secures a bed and receiving physician for the patient.
- 4** At the same time, PAACC contacts the pilot and paramedical groups separately to

notify them of the transport request.

5The pilot group checks the weather, ground times, and fuel levels and determines whether or not they can safely accept the transport.

6The paramedical group begins all the necessary preparations for that particular transport and quickly mobilizes to the referring hospital.

7Upon arrival, the patient's care is transferred from the hospital to the paramedical group. Through extensive preparation both groups can help minimize the amount of transfer time.

8The patient is then taken to the airport usually by ambulance, transferred to the plane, and then flown to the specified airport while under constant monitoring and care of the paramedics.

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9Once arrived, the paramedics transfer the patient to the awaiting ambulance, assist with the transfer to the referral hospital, and provide staff with a complete status report.

Each air transport is different and the time and resources involved can vary greatly depending on the severity of the case, the location of the referring and referral facilities, weather, and other extenuating factors. Upon completion of each transport, the paramedical group returns to the airport, cleans up, and readies themselves for their next assignment.

There are currently six Air Ambulance contracts in British Columbia of which Kelowna-based, Carson Air manages four



of them. Carson Air currently operates four Super King Air 350s providing daily service throughout the Province and additional service as required into Alberta and the US. The Super King Air 350 aircraft are well-suited for the Air Ambulance program and Carson Air's maintenance teams play a huge role in ensuring planes are ready to go each and every day. To effectively service their client's needs, Carson Air staffs 18 pilots who, in 2008, transported over 3500 patients, flew 1.7 million air miles, and were available to respond with over 35,000 hours of pilot time. "We couldn't do what we do here without the teamwork and can-do mentality of Carson Air", says LeBlanc.

The Kelowna base is a day-only operation with 9 paramedics, 9 pilots, and 2 dedicated fixed wing aircraft staffed and ready

to go 7 days a week. The sheer number transport requests received each day keep the Kelowna base hopping and operating at full capacity. One aircraft is designated for high acuity patients while the other for low acuity patients. On average, the high acuity aircraft will complete 6 to 8 legs, transport 3 to 4 patients, and travel 1,000 to 1,200 air miles each day. The low acuity aircraft, on average, completes 8 to 10 legs, transports 6 to 8 patients, and travels 1,600 to 1,800 miles each day.

The Air Ambulance program is an impressive operation that ensures all BC residents receive the best possible care wherever they may be located in the province. For more information about the Air Ambulance program and work done by Carson Air, please visit www.bcas.ca and www.carsonair.com. ■

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