Good Sam's AirCare Program has seen several changes

For three-and-a-half decades, the AirCare Service program at Good Samaritan Hospital in Kearney has transported ill and injured patients from nearly everywhere in the state and northern Kansas to hospitals.

Over the last 10 years, chief flight nurse Doug Wulf said AirCare has flown 400-420 missions annually.

However, as you can imagine, back in 1982 when the program started flying transport missions, there were fewer trips.

In fact, only 69 patient missions were flown in the program's first year.

Wulf said there was a need in central Nebraska for rapid ambulance transport. With only two other medical air ambulances in the state, both in Omaha, AirCare was born.

"The program started primarily for transportation of ill newborns," Wulf said. "Presently, only about 3% of all missions involve babies."

Around 95% of current flight missions are interfacility—transporting a patient from one hospital to another—for pediatric, cardiac or adult trauma.

A majority of those interfacility missions return to Good Samaritan, Wulf said.

Of course, not all air transports involved taking a patient from one hospital to another. Sometimes, in the program's 425-mile radius of coverage, pilots have to do an on-site landing.

Wulf said there have been instances when a pilot must land the aircraft on the side of a highway, or in a corn field, which increases the risk.

The AirCare program contracts with Rodgers Helicopter Services, LLC, in Kearney.

In the early 1990's, Good Samaritan used a Sikorsky S-76 that had the ability to transport two patients at a time with a pilot and medical personnel onboard flying at a top speed of 165 mph.

Out of necessity, the program upgraded to a Bell-426 aircraft in 2012 that was 3,500 pounds lighter, more agile and traveled at a speed of 172 mph which makes it the fastest medical helicopter in Nebraska.

"It is much better for scene missions," Wulf said. "The Sikorsky was more of a challenge to lift from on-scene."

In addition to its lightweight and mobile frame, the Bell allows transportation of two patients while fitting in two pilots and two or three medical personnel.

So who flies these aircrafts?

Wulf explained the pilots have medical experience but those credentials aren't as important to Rodgers who evaluates the aircraft controllers.

“You have to have quite a bit of experience in a helicopter, and not just flying experience,” Wulf said.

Pilots need to be trained in different situations and different weather conditions because EMS aircrafts don’t have the luxury of landing at a specific zone.

Pilots must meet a specific rating in an aircraft and log a certain amount of hours in both day and nighttime flight. That is what Rodgers looks at, Wulf said.

Since 2004, there has been a need for more EMS aircraft in the area, which has been provided, Wulf said, but Good Samaritan still flies 90,000 miles annually and transports over 400 patients.

abenson@qwestoffice.net

308-537-3636