

## Middle East seeks AA operators

Air medical transfer is not only a life saving solution for patients, it is also a part of the macro and micro healthcare investment plans of medical facilities large and small, state and private, all of whom need to factor in how to deal with such cases. Dr Fatih Mehmet Gul tells of how despite a boom in healthcare provision in the Middle East, aeromedical services seem to be out of sight and out of mind

### Investment initiative

The Middle East region is currently experiencing rapid economic growth, powered by record oil prices, especially in the six Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries. As a result, cash-rich governments are splashing out on new infrastructure projects, and the healthcare sector is benefiting nicely, with expenditure in this area predicted to rise to new heights in the next three

years. The private medical sector is growing fast and health insurance sales are rising steadily, with the result that there is a new focus on raising the quality of medical care provided in the region. Even though several of the new major healthcare projects are not yet complete, talk of planning for patient transfers and international repatriations is still pending, and incorporating such procedures into the hospitals' planning stage is just not happening. The main problem, however, is the lack of companies offering aeromedical services – both for short-haul or internal hospital transfers, or indeed for international repatriation work. Even ground ambulance procurement is a problem for these new advanced healthcare facilities, who may have the latest technological medical equipment and pristine facilities, but who lack available facilities to transfer patients either internationally or locally. Where they do have sufficient ground ambulances, inner-city traffic is becoming a big problem for primary and secondary patient transfers in cities such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi, but this is a separate planning issue that needs to be addressed.

### Booming business

The Middle East's aviation industry recorded above average growth of 5.5-per-cent between 2002 and 2005, where the global average growth rate was 4.8 per cent. By further considering the

demographics of the region, where 100 million people are under the age of 24 and millions more are expatriates, it becomes clear that air travel will increasingly be seen as a necessity rather than a luxury in the region. Indeed, between now and 2020, the Middle East is forecast to lead world passenger traffic growth, with current travel demand up 18 per cent. What does this mean for aeromedical services in the region? Well, the more people entering the region, the more people that are likely to need hospital treatment and the use of aeromedical services to and from the region. Since it is so difficult to find a local partner providing air medical services, most insurance policies in the region do not yet include the provision of such services. International air ambulance companies are also thin on the ground, which doesn't help the situation. More investment

– both from local investors with the backing of local hospitals, and from international air ambulance operators – is needed in the Middle East.

### Work in progress

Regardless of the existence of a few private air ambulance companies with their own fleets, almost all air medical services in the region are currently being conducted by governmental agencies such as the army, and the police; most of these flights are only offered for intra-hospital transfers. Further problems with this system lie in the fact that it often takes a comparatively long time to gain the necessary governmental approval to use an aircraft for such a purpose, especially problematic given the fact that fleet capacity is low anyway. The quality of medical care on such flights is also low, and overall quality is not assured by internationally recognised agencies such as CAMTS and EURAMI. So, the Middle East has a real and growing need for aeromedical services. Air ambulance operators that establish themselves in the region have a market ripe for promoting their services too. In the next few years, the region will become even more affluent and people will continue their search for better services in every sector, meaning the patient transfer offering will have to catch up with that of its medical facility sister. The best way it's going to do this is to bring in newcomers to the region, as has been the case in other areas of the healthcare sector.



Dr Fatih Mehmet Gul is a Flight Physician with an MBA in finance. He is the project manager for Saudi HEMS, which is the first civilian helicopter ambulance service in the Middle East. He is also founder of Air Ambulance Arabia.

## Air ambulance takes to the skies

The new Great Western air ambulance service has now started in the UK, based in the home town of the ITIJ team – Bristol. The helicopter is crewed by critical care paramedics and doctors and carries advanced life-saving equipment. Initially, the plan is to operate the aircraft five days a week, but only as long as it raises the necessary £1.3 million annually to keep flying. Tim Lynch, chief executive of Great Western Ambulance Service, said: "The new air ambulance has been set up in response to an identified gap in air ambulance cover for the people of Avon. It will save lives – and complement the existing paramedic teams on the ground."



## Raisbeck celebrates

Raisbeck Engineering has announced that the 75th ZR Lite Performance System is currently being installed by Duncan Aviation, an authorised dealer of Raisbeck for the past 20 years. The Lear 35 that is being kitted out is operated by MaCair Jet SA of Buenos Aires, Argentina on behalf of Albanesi SA and Swiss Medical Group SA. MaCair's director of maintenance Daniel Kucharzucuk said of the new system: "Raisbeck systems enhance the performance of the 30 series Learjet at a relatively low cost. The fact that ZR Lite pays for itself in a short time is an added bonus! In short, ZR Lite brings my crew better performance and adds safety for my passengers, all while reducing fuel burn."

## Obesity problem addressed

The growing girth of some air ambulance passengers has been noted as an issue of concern by several aeromedical providers, and was highlighted recently by a case reported in *Waypoint, AirMed & Rescue Magazine* when a Hercules plane was used to airlift a patient to hospital after it was found he couldn't fit into the jet supplied by the Royal Flying Doctors Service. Now, however, an American company, Airlift Northwest, has announced new measures to help such companies deal with overweight patients. Mardie Rhodes, a spokeswoman for the non-profit air ambulance operator, said: "There's been a real issue with the size and girth of some of the patients we've been asked to transport." In order to cope with the problem, the firm has started to ask hospitals and emergency site dispatchers to fill out a special form when requesting transport for anyone weighing more than 250 pounds. The form asks for detailed information, including measurements of the patient's stomach. Jeff Richey, a regional manager for Airlift Northwest, said this type of information is critical to the successful completion of a transfer. For the safety of the flight crew, they need to know whether or not they will physically be able to lift the patient without injuring themselves. In addition, it is vital that the crew knows for sure whether the patient will fit into the helicopter or jet, or whether when they are inside, they will take up too much room, making it impossible for the crew to manoeuvre in flight. The new policy on reporting details of a patient's size aims to eliminate such problems from the equation, making for safer and faster transfers. According to Richey, at least once a year the Airlift Northwest crew are called out, only to find out the patient is too big to fly, so they ended up loading them onto ground ambulances and accompanying the patients to hospital that way – this is hardly ideal though. "In our business, we're called on to move a patient quickly," said Richey, "We're delaying the

transport if we can't take them physically in the aircraft." Statistics from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that one third of all American adults – roughly 72 million people – are considered to be obese. Given that obesity rates have been increasing steadily over the past two decades, those numbers are only going one way, so the air ambulance industry must be properly prepared to deal with such patients when the need arises. Indeed, other companies in the industry have also introduced measures designed specifically to deal with obese patients. American Medical Response has placed a larger ambulance in the Portland area, complete with heavy-duty lifting equipment to move obese patients, said spokesperson Lucie Drum. The big ambulance has a larger patient compartment, carries a gurney that is capable of supporting 1,000 pounds, and a sports ramp for patient loading. Elsewhere, the Fire Department of Seattle now carries a device known as a Mage Mover – a tough fabric sheet with 12 handles on that can carry up to 1,500 pounds, as well as wider backboards. The Association of Air Medical Services has agreed that the problem needs addressing urgently by air ambulances, as there is nowhere that weight has more importance than in an aircraft. There have even been incidents reported where a helicopter has arrived to find an obese patient, and had to fly around for a while burning off fuel so that the patient could be safely transported – hardly a favourable option given today's record fuel prices. If you've had an experience like any mentioned in this article, please contact ITIJ with details at mail@itij.co.uk.





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