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Helicopter crash report points to fog

By DAVID WAHLBERG | *Wisconsin State Journal*

MADISON — Two medical helicopter crews turned down flights — and one halted a flight — because of bad weather on the night last May when UW Hospital's Med Flight chopper crashed near La Crosse.

Records released Thursday by the National Transportation Safety Board do not provide a probable cause of the May 10 crash, which killed the crew of three, but the records suggest foggy conditions may have contributed.

A Mayo Medical Center crew in Eau Claire declined flights to Arcadia, La Crosse and Rochester, Minn. The crew aborted a flight to Alma Center, transporting the patient by ambulance instead.

Allan Jacobson, a pilot for Medlink at Gundersen Lutheran Hospital in La Crosse, declined a flight to Winona, Minn.

Killed in the Med Flight crash were Dr. Darren Bean, 37; nurse Mark Coyne, 53; and pilot Steve Lipperer, 39. It was the first crash since Med Flight started in 1985.

The crew left Madison about 8:30 p.m. on the rainy and foggy Saturday. They picked up an

86-year-old patient in Prairie du Chien and delivered her to Gundersen Lutheran because Gundersen's helicopter was busy, officials have said. The patient died a few hours later.

The men stopped at the La Crosse airport to refuel before heading back to Madison at 10:34 p.m. At 11:04 p.m., the helicopter was reported missing. A search team found the chopper at the top of a wooded ridge about 4.5 miles southeast of the La Crosse airport about 9 a.m. the next day.

Though it was foggy that night, Lipperer "had appropriate weather minimums," said Craig Yale, a spokesman for Air Methods, a Denver-based company that leases helicopters to Med Flight.

Toni Morrissey, a UW Hospital spokeswoman, said "we are in no position to second guess the decision of very experienced and skilled pilots and crew members."

Lipperer operated visually rather than by instruments, as is allowed under certain weather conditions, officials have said.

Helicopter didn't have key safety features

The helicopter that crashed didn't have two pieces of equipment recommended by the NTSB: night-vision goggles and a terrain warning system.

Night-vision goggles could have helped pilots take action in 13 of the 55 medical helicopter

crashes from 2002 to 2005, the NTSB said in 2006. Terrain warning systems, which can alert pilots 25 seconds before an impact, could have helped prevent 17 of the 55 crashes, the agency said.

Air Methods has been gradually upgrading its fleet at a cost of about \$100,000 each.

Med Flight's remaining permanent helicopter, also leased from Air Methods, is scheduled to receive the safety equipment next month, Morrissey said. That aircraft is a Eurocopter EC135, like the one that crashed.

Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center's MedLink AIR helicopter flight crew began using portable night vision goggles in 2003 and upgraded to helmet mounted goggles in August 2008, said Quentin Lamers, clinical manager of MedLink AIR.

Engine was OK

Other documents released by NTSB Thursday said a fuel access panel may not have been properly locked on the Med Flight helicopter that crashed. Yale said it's highly unlikely that was a factor in the incident.

Lipperer had no drugs in his body, and the chopper's engine was operating normally, other documents said.

An NTSB analysis of the incident, including a probable cause, will be released later, said Keith Holloway, a spokesman for the agency.

The NTSB released the Med Flight crash records along with reports for eight other fatal medical helicopter crashes from December 2007 to October 2008. The nine crashes killed 35 people.

A recent string of fatalities has led the agency to organize a four-day public hearing on the issue next month in Washington, D.C.

UW Hospital has been discussing a memorial or tribute to the Med Flight crew, but no details are available, Morrissey said.

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