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Local News

Mayo air-ambulance directors call for better safety measures

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By Jeff Hansel

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A rash of fatal crashes of medical helicopters nationwide has prompted Mayo Clinic air-ambulance directors to take a public stand and call for better medical-helicopter safety.

"We'd like to see the bar raised for everybody," said Glenn Lyden, corporate communications manager with Mayo Medical Transport. "We like to think that we set the bar."

Technology plays a major role. Mayo has added terrain-awareness warning systems to alert pilots who get too near the ground, night-vision goggles, terrain collision avoidance and global positioning beacons that help pilots hone in on oft-visited hospitals.

Lyden says Mayo's newest acquisition, the American Eurocopter EC145, is the "most technologically advanced medical aircraft in the world" because it uses such high-tech gear to prevent crashes.

At least nine U.S. medical helicopters crashed between mid-December 2007, and mid-December 2008, according to the National Transportation Safety Board. At least 31 people died -- five patients, 17 medical staff and nine pilots.

"We need to get the industry safer," said Neil Wienk, aviation site manager for Omniflight Helicopters Inc., a private company supplying Mayo's contract pilots and mechanics. Yet crashes continue, sometimes nearby.

In May, a doctor, nurse and pilot on a University of Wisconsin Med Flight died after delivering a patient to Gunderson Lutheran Medical Center in La Crosse.

"It makes you think. When I heard it, all of a sudden it becomes pretty close to home. We've flown that same flight path ourselves. We have before then, and since then," said Lyden, who knew one of the deceased.

Wienk believes the people aboard that helicopter "would still be alive today" if they had a terrain-awareness warning system.

"What keeps us awake at night is other helicopters are out there flying without technology that exists," he said. "I think we owe it to our patients, it behooves us to use technology."

Web links

- [Mayo Clinic Medical Transport](#)
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