Healthcare: Staying Safe on the Heliport

What’s at Stake?

A helicopter transfer may be needed due to the remoteness of the patient when they need medical attention, or the severity of their need requires rapid transfer to hospital care. Sometimes they need to move to a different hospital for treatment. Whatever the specifics of the case, these medical needs are urgent and often life threatening. The fastest and safest way to get them to the care they need is by helicopter. But it’s not without risks.

What’s the Danger?

Working around a heliport presents risks to the helicopter crew, clinical staff on the ground, and the patient. The helicopter rotor blades present the most obvious risk but, in many cases, they are high off the ground. However, the draft from them can knock a person off their feet, cause debris to fly about or suck items such as loose clothing or equipment into their path.

There are many blind spots for the pilot and helicopters can be quite unstable and unpredictable in adverse weather, especially windy conditions. This puts ground staff at risk of collision with the helicopter. Noise generated can be distracting, affects the ability to hear each other clearly and repeated exposure can cause permanent hearing impairment.

How to Protect Yourself

5 easy ways to keep yourself safe while working on a heliport

1. Be seen

    - Make eye contact with the pilot and get an acknowledgement that she or he has seen you.

- Approach the helicopter from the side or front, never the back, even if the engine is off.

2. Be aware

    - Know the rotor blades span and do not walk, work, or stand under or near them.
    - Watch the helicopter’s approach and keep well back.
    - Note wind conditions and allow more space for landing and takeoff, if possible.
    - Check for loose clothing, equipment or debris around the heliport that may fly up and hit someone.

3. Clear communication

    - Follow all instructions from the pilot – he (or she) is in charge of the helicopter and heliport.
    - Use hand signals.
    - Speak clearly to others, standing next to them, as far away from the helicopter as possible.
    - Write commands and questions.
    - Wear earplugs, earmuffs, or other hearing protection.
    - Secure or remove any loose clothing, including patient bedding.

4. Keep safe around fuel

    - Fuel fumes can cause nausea, headache, or breathing difficulties.
    - During refueling – do not smoke or use equipment capable of causing sparks.

5. Safe patient moving and handling

    - Use patient handling equipment e.g.
        - Wheeled trolleys, transfer boards.
    - Use safe patient handling techniques e.g.
        - Avoid twisting, do not lift the patient or heavy equipment.

Final Word

For health professionals working on a heliport it is a high-pressure situation as the patient is generally very ill. However, it is very important that staff all remain alert to real and potential hazards to themselves and others on the heliport.