

Helijet air ambulance flights permanently resume 24/7 at BC hospitals

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Vancouver – Air ambulance flights operated by BC Emergency Health Services (BCEHS) partner Helijet International will be fully and permanently restored at all hospital helipads in BC, effective 8:30 am tomorrow.

The resumption of flights is thanks to Transport Canada approval of a new flight manual supplement for the Sikorsky S76C+ helicopters used by Helijet. Approval of the new supplement follows months of intensive collaboration between BCEHS, Helijet, Maxcraft Avionics, Sikorsky Aircraft and Transport Canada to test and validate certain flight operating procedures for the aircraft.

Questions raised by Transport Canada last spring resulted in Helijet voluntarily stopping its Sikorsky 76C+ air ambulances from landing at up to seven BC hospital helipads, pending the go-ahead by the federal regulator. Exemptions were granted in some circumstances, while the questions were being addressed. As a result, Helijet flights had already been restored last August at five of the seven hospitals, but remained restricted until now at the Royal Columbian and Surrey Memorial Hospital helipads, where BCEHS was using an alternate service provider.

BCEHS' primary concern is the safety of its patients and staff. Patient care was protected during this period, by ensuring air ambulance flights carrying patients to affected hospitals were diverted to nearby landing sites. Patients were then transported by ground ambulance, accompanied at all times by highly-skilled paramedics. In all, 37 flights were diverted to other sites.

The matter was eventually resolved when Helijet was able to work with Transport Canada and an independent aviation expert to conduct detailed aircraft testing, resulting in a new "Supplemental Type Certificate" or STC. This Certificate is being permanently added to the S76C+ flight manual documentation and allows Helijet to fully resume landings at the previously restricted helipads. This development may be of benefit to other operators using this aircraft in similar ways.

"This outcome is a real credit to the hard work and collaboration of our government and service-partners to put patients' interests first," said Linda Lupini, executive vice president of Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA) and BCEHS. "We are grateful to Transport Canada for the time and effort they dedicated to working with Helijet, Maxcraft Avionics, Sikorsky and us at BCEHS to resolve this issue."

The BCEHS air ambulance fleet has a total of nine aircraft – four helicopters and five airplanes, based in Vancouver, Kamloops, Kelowna, Prince George and Prince Rupert. Helijet operates three of the helicopters. BCEHS air ambulances carry approximately 8,000 patients a year.

(A timeline of the review process is attached below as background.)

BC Emergency Health Services (BCEHS) is responsible for the delivery and governance of pre-hospital emergency medical care and inter-facility patient transfer services through the BC Ambulance Service and the BC Patient Transfer Network. www.bcehs.ca

The Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA) plans, manages and evaluates selected specialty and province-wide health care services across BC, working with the five geographic health authorities to deliver province-wide solutions that improve the health of British Columbians. For more information, visit www.phsa.ca or follow us on Twitter @PHSAofBC.

Backgrounder

Timeline March 10 - Transport Canada raises questions regarding the use of Helijet's S76C+ helicopters at seven "H1" (urban) hospital helipads, based on information contained in some of the aircraft's flight (operating) manual and its respective flight supplements. Interpreted for single pilot operations, the information suggests certain additional equipment modifications could be necessary for use in the helicopter when operating at the helipads. Helijet air ambulance flight operations use two pilots.

Helijet suspends flights at the seven hospitals:

- BC Children's Hospital and BC Women's Hospitals (C&W), Vancouver
- Vancouver General Hospital (VGH)
- Royal Columbian Hospital (RCH), New Westminster
- Surrey Memorial Hospital (SMH)
- Nanaimo Regional General Hospital
- St Joseph's Hospital, Comox
- Sechelt Hospital

March 22 - Helijet receives an exemption from Transport Canada until September 2017, allowing it to continue operations at the helipads while working with Sikorsky to resolve the issue.

August 10 - Transport Canada identifies additional operating concerns, related to night operations at three of the helipads, at VGH, RCH and SMH, as well as the size of the RCH and SMH helipads. Again, the concerns are based on information in the existing flight manual and supplements, interpreted for single pilot operations. Helijet again suspends flights at the seven hospitals.

August 25 - Transport Canada provides a new exemption, valid until January 31, 2017, enabling Helijet to resume all landings at four hospital helipads – C&W, Nanaimo, St. Joseph's and Sechelt – plus day flights only at VGH. Night flights at VGH, and all flights at RCH and SMH, remain restricted.

September 3 - BCEHS secures the services of a smaller MD902 aircraft through another operator, Ascent Helicopters, allowing day flights to resume at the Royal Columbian and Surrey Memorial helipads.

November 25 – After Helijet retains an independent aviation industry expert to test and compile new operating information for the Sikorsky S76C+, based on two pilots, Transport Canada approves a new "Supplemental Type Certificate" (STC) to be added to the aircraft flight manual documentation, clearing Helijet's aircraft for flights to all H1 designated helipads.

December 2 - Helijet permanently resumes flights at all helipads.

About BCEHS: BC Emergency Health Services (BCEHS) is responsible for the delivery and governance of pre-hospital emergency medical care and inter-facility patient transfer services through the BC Ambulance Service and the BC Patient Transfer Network.

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