



Revolution in the UK

The UK's civil helicopter air ambulance community is well established. Services in Scotland are provided exclusively by the state-run National Health Service (NHS), while England and Wales have been divided into a network of charities, performing mainly primary scene missions, each fundraising from businesses and the public within their flight area. Step in the Newborn and Paediatric Emergency Transport Service (NETS UK), promising a national service with an innovative funding model.

If successful, the NETS UK will be the first helicopter air ambulance to operate across the whole of England and Wales (despite the 'UK' moniker, the service will not routinely cover Scotland or Northern Ireland). The charity has been modelled on the experience of NETS New South Wales (NSW) in Australia, and Dr Andrew Berry of NETS NSW has been named as honorary medical director. The founding head of the new service was Martin Eede, former

ABOVE: NETS NSW staff pictured with Telstra Child Flight helicopters

BELOW: Dr Andrew Berry, honorary medical director of NETS UK, being interviewed by the BBC at the opening of the charity's airbase and clinical training centre

NETS NSW // NETS UK



In the UK helicopter air medical community, revolution is rare. Then, in May this year, came the news of a new nationwide charity declaring its aim of providing airborne medical transport for children and newborn infants. **James Paul Wallis** reports

chief executive of Yorkshire Air Ambulance, before his departure from NETS UK as chief executive officer in August due to ill health shortly after the writing of this article.

New kid on the block

For some years, a case has been put forward for a dedicated helicopter transport service to fly neonatal and paediatric patients from UK healthcare facilities to specialist treatment centres. Such services already exist in the US and Australia, for example, and in Scotland, the Neonatal Transfer Service has developed the means to fly patients onboard Scottish Ambulance Service aircraft – both organisations are part of the NHS. However, efforts to set up a similar provider in England and Wales have to some extent been hindered by the way that helicopter emergency medical services (HEMS) have been developed in the past. Consider the experience of The Children's Air Ambulance (TCAA), which has so far failed to

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raise enough funds to begin services. TCAA has, shall we say, not been widely welcomed by the existing HEMS charities in England and Wales, stemming perhaps from a competition for resources. The current members of the Association of Air Ambulances (AAA) in England and Wales are in their nature territorial – each fundraises within their own, exclusive area of operation. In trying to raise money from members of the public, TCAA has been dipping into the same well, and a number of articles have appeared in local newspapers in areas where TCAA has been fundraising, each with the area's HEMS charity taking pains to point out that TCAA is not operational and no money donated will go to the local service.

In contrast, NETS UK has so far side-stepped this conflict by largely targeting corporate donors, including national and international companies such as global banking group HSBC. Where TCAA has struggled to make significant headway, HSBC staff in the northeast of England had raised enough money by May this year for NETS UK to



ABOVE: Heléna Holt, chief executive of the Devon Air Ambulance Trust and current chair of the AAA

BELOW: In Scotland, the Neonatal Transfer Service has developed a dedicated loading system and flight adapted incubator kits for use onboard the Scottish Ambulance Service's EC135 helicopters and King Air planes

DAAT // NTS

take on the lease of a property at Sheffield City Heliport. And as yet, no hostility has been made apparent on the part of the existing charities.

Medical need

A key criticism levelled at TCAA in the past has been that there is not sufficient demand to justify a service catering only to children and neonates, and that the local HEMS charities are able to transport this patient group when needed. In the June issue of UK publication *Police Aviation News*, a monthly online news journal, editor Bryn Elliot wrote of these concerns, saying: "It seems that the need [for neonatal emergency transfers] is so rare that no one has sought to quantify that need in terms of air transport specifics." Elliot further suggested that the best estimate is that there might be around 100 such flights per year; a proportion of which would be undertaken by existing HEMS services, leaving a specialist helicopter to 'sit on the ground for weeks on end'.

Eede responded to these concerns in the following issue, citing support from clinicians across the country at a conference held by NETS UK in May, as well as from the Paediatric Intensive Care Society (PICS) and the Neo-natal Intensive Care Society (NICS). He emphasised that NETS UK would only undertake pre-planned inter-hospital transfers, with no emergency HEMS missions, saying that research by clinicians had shown a need for 480 paediatric, and 780 neonatal inter-hospital flights per year. In terms of the ability of the existing HEMS services to carry out these missions, there >>





are several factors to consider. The helicopters typically used are small enough to require specialised transport incubator systems, such as was developed by the Neonatal Transfer Service in Scotland when it wanted to move from using the capacious, but expensive, Ministry of Defence Sea King helicopters to the Scottish Ambulance Service's more modest EC135s and King Airls. In terms of availability, inter-facility missions take aircraft away from being on standby for emergency response, and will sometimes take them outside of their normal operating area (and hence outside the domicile of their donors). There is also the question of access to trained specialist medical crews.

Heléna Holt, chief executive of the Devon Air Ambulance Trust and current chair of the AAA, explained that many of the Association's members do carry out 'air ambulance' missions such as inter-hospital transfers, although neonatal and paediatric inter-facility flights are a 'small proportion' of missions. She said: "Here in Devon, we have a specialist incubator for neonates. This requires a refit of the aircraft, which means such missions can take one of our aircraft offline for several hours. It is used approximately four times a year. On top of that, we also do paediatric transfers as well as adult transfers." She added: "In total, transfers account for

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ABOVE: Library image of two Telstra Child Flight helicopters, which are used for NETS NSW retrievals in Australia

RIGHT: Dr Andrew Berry, state medical director for NETS NSW, Australia, has been named as honorary medical director of NETS UK



around two per cent of our work. I think almost all AAA members carry out inter-facility transfers, but the numbers are low everywhere. We are only likely to undertake inter-hospital transfers where the patient is time-critical." For many transfers, said Holt, the patient is stabilised, however, and speed is not necessarily the greatest priority.

One interesting note is that in spite of Holt saying that the AAA would welcome the new service as a member, if and when it meets the membership criteria, Eede said NETS UK may not want to join, which would make it the only operational helicopter medical charity not to be a member. Speaking to *Waypoint*, he suggested AAA membership may not benefit NETS UK, and the way forward may instead be to set up a new paediatric transfer organisation.

NETS NSW

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TCAA reaction

So, what of TCAA? Is it time for the charity to cease operations and pass the mantle on to NETS UK? Not according to Nicola Howkins, CEO of TCAA, who told us that there is definitely a need for both services. In fact, she added, there would ideally be two rotary and one fixed-wing aircraft in total, and Eede agrees that there is work for more than one helicopter. Howkins added that TCAA is also looking at raising more funds from corporate donors, in line with NETS UK's recent moves,



and is in discussion with the new charity on how they can co-ordinate or work together. Importantly, the race to launch is not yet won – as neither of the charities has yet taken to the skies, both can fundraise under the banner of working to be the first paediatric service in the UK. Should either get the initial flight, it will be interesting to see whether the other can continue to raise funds for what could be seen as a duplicate service.

Outlook

Clearly, NETS UK has come onto the scene with a bang. It's been a confident start, with facilities and a Clinical Training Centre being set up, and even James Bond film star Dame Judi Dench named as patron. So far so good, but helicopter operations must begin in the near future, before the service risks being ranked alongside charities such as TCAA and those in Northern Ireland, and indeed the neighbouring Republic of Ireland, that have spent years raising funds but failed to follow through.

If the medical need is as NETS UK describes, then for the sake of the children of England and Wales, we wish them well. ▲

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