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COMMENTARY

The Doctor Is In

The making of a 24/7 'everywhere' ER

Of all the participants converging on Rio de Janeiro for the Summer Olympics, the winged insect *Aedes aegypti* has the special attention of Paulo Alves and his team headquartered in Phoenix.

The global medical director for Aviation for MedAire, cardiologist Dr. Alves is busy fielding questions from travelers regarding the mosquito most frequently associated with transmitting the Zika virus so concerning to athletes and others.

To protect oneself, he advises remaining indoors if practicable, and when going out wearing long-sleeve shirts and applying a DEET-based repellent. Alternately, avoid areas where Zika is endemic, a course of action likely to be followed by some MedAire clients, who include business aircraft operators, yacht owners and airlines.

MedAire was created, in part, to help customers recognize a health risk in advance of traveling and then work to mitigate or avoid it. Its services expanded early to include addressing medical emergencies in flight and later grew to address personal security risks around the world.

Founded in 1985, MedAire was the brainchild of Joan Sullivan Garrett (see photo, right). A critical-care registered flight nurse with the Samaritan Health System, her experience helping patients in desert areas convinced her of the need for providing emergency medical care to people in remote locations.

Initially, she provided training to business aviation pilots and flight attendants in handling inflight illness and injury. Then in 1987, with a \$22,500 investment by Samaritan, she created MedLink, now a key feature of MedAire. It is a communications link whereby flight crews can call during an inflight medical situation and be immediately con-



MEDIAIRE PHOTOS

nected with an emergency room (ER) doctor for advice (see photo above).

According to MedAire, 80-90% of the events are resolved in flight, but when conditions warrant, the doctor may advise the flight crew to land as soon as possible—something business aircraft can more easily do than an airliner. By the time the aircraft touches down, MedAire staff will have alerted the fixed base operation or airline and local medical providers of the circumstances.

Soon after MedLink went live, a passenger-in-distress call came in from an American Trans Air flight that was over the mid-Atlantic at the time. ER Dr. Robert Baron fielded the call, diagnosed a heart attack was in progress and recommended that the airliner divert. It

did, and the passenger survived.

The number of inflight calls grew steadily as more business flight departments and airlines signed on. According to CEO Bill Dolny, MedAire receives more than 7,000 inflight medical calls a month, most from airlines due to their higher passenger count.

Customer aircraft are equipped

with MedAire-created emergency kits. Indeed, it was in part due to Garrett's testimony that the FAA now requires aircraft weighing more than 7,500 lb. and crewed by at least one flight attendant to be equipped with an approved automated external defibrillator and enhanced emergency medical kit.

Since medical emergencies can be the direct result of an unexpected event while traveling—anything from a car accident to a passenger mugging or assaults on crews—MedAire expanded its coverage to include security assessments, alerts and protection globally. Business jets and yachts are “flashy things” that can draw unwelcome attention in parts of the world, Dolny notes.

He was sought out by a customer at the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) convention last November. The European charter operator's crew had been attending a meeting near their Beirut hotel just days earlier when a pair of suicide bombers exploded backpacks nearby, killing 43 people and injuring 200. The operator contacted MedAire for help. Within an hour, company security personnel in Dubai briefed the pilots on the evolving situation and recommended a safe route to the airport. The charter crew made it home without incident, and the operator wanted to say “thanks.”

Today, roughly half of MedAire's 200 interactions with business aviation customers each month involve security matters, typically pre-trip briefings about destinations.

The company regularly updates the health and security risks in the 250 most frequented sites worldwide.

In 2008, MedAire became a part of International SOS, an umbrella organization with over 250 company affiliates that provide medical assistance, security, evacuation, travel and consulting services and that operates 27 assistance centers worldwide.

Meanwhile, Nurse Garrett continues as MedAire's chairman, celebrated for turning a good idea into a global reality. She has been a board member of both the NBAA and Flight Safety Foundation and has received numerous prestigious awards for her work. Beyond that, she's a truly lovely person. Hers is a gold medal career. 🏆

