

Flying A&E Service Lands in North Wales

The enhanced Service will be officially launched today at Caernarfon Airport by the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Vaughan Gething AM. Also at the launch will be Wales Air Ambulance (WAA) Chief Executive Angela Hughes, 'Welsh Flying Medics' interim National Director Dr Ami Jones, Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (BCUHB) Chair Peter Higson, and BCUHB Deputy Chief Executive Dr Evan Moore.

In 2015, a unique Third Sector-Public Sector partnership was created between the WAA, Welsh Government and NHS Wales. This resulted in the creation of the Emergency Medical Retrieval and Transfer Service (EMRTS Cymru), more commonly known as the 'Welsh Flying Medics', which provides pioneering pre-hospital critical and emergency medical care across Wales.

The Service, which effectively takes the emergency room to the patients, is made up of Welsh Government-funded NHS consultants and critical care practitioners who are able to deliver innovative emergency treatments usually not available outside the hospital environment.

The WAA raises £6.5 million every year from charitable donations to keep the helicopters flying.

Before the 'Welsh Flying Medics' service was introduced, all WAA helicopters were staffed by paramedics. The introduction of consultants and critical care practitioners means that the service is now able to conduct blood transfusions, administer anaesthetics, offer strong painkillers, and conduct a range of medical procedures – all at the scene of an incident.

Over the past two years, the 'Flying Medics' have become operational on the WAA helicopters based in Dafen and in Welshpool. The next phase has seen the Service start working from the Charity's base in Caernarfon. As well as the introduction of the medics, the Charity has also unveiled a newer, more advanced aircraft for North Wales.

In addition, the Service also has access to a fleet of Rapid Response Vehicles and an RRV will be based in Caernarfon along with the advanced helicopter. The medical equipment has been designed to be interchangeable between the Charity's helicopters and the RRVs.

As well as the original partners, this development is being supported by BCUHB and the Welsh Ambulance Service.

An independent evaluation by the Farr Institute at Swansea University has already started to reveal how the 'Welsh Flying Medics' service is having a positive impact on critical care in Wales.

Results indicate that:

- by taking the emergency room to the patient, the Service has shortened the time it takes for somebody who is critically ill to receive consultant-led treatment
- more people in Wales, in rural and urban areas, now have equal access to timely consultant-led treatment during an emergency incident, and can be immediately transported to specialist care at healthcare facilities across Wales and beyond
- the Service has relieved some pressure on frontline NHS emergency services. It has improved the time it takes for certain patients to be taken for a CT scan or emergency surgery. In addition, the Service has reduced timely and costly transfers between hospitals by taking patients directly to the appropriate specialist care
- the Service has supported the development of skills and knowledge in critical and emergency care for NHS Wales employees, both during emergency incidents and by organising regular training opportunities.

Evidence of long-term patient health benefits will be presented over the next few years; however, international evidence suggests that advanced critical and emergency care at the scene of an incident or at a peripheral hospital improves the chances, and speed, of patient recovery.

The Service has also supported the recruitment of emergency medicine and anaesthesia consultants into Wales, including BCUHB.

Health Secretary Vaughan Gething said:

“I welcome this initiative that will enhance the existing service from Caernarfon and bring it in line with the rest of the EMRTS cover enjoyed elsewhere.

“It will bring access to critical care and emergency medicine much closer for people living in North Wales and ensure that they can get the best care more quickly.

“The new helicopter and rapid response vehicle available at the airbase will protect the existing WAA service and make the area more attractive to the very best clinicians and critical care practitioners. It will play a vital role in the provision of high quality unscheduled care across North Wales.”

Dr Ami Jones, EMRTS Cymru Interim National Director, said:

“Wales can pride itself on having established and consistent platinum-standard critical care across all of the country, via the WAA’s bases in North, Mid and South Wales. The Service is already supporting the work of Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board but this next stage in our development can only enhance the benefits that we bring, not just in North Wales, but in Powys and parts of Ceredigion.”

Angela Hughes, Wales Air Ambulance Charity Chief Executive, said:

“The innovative equipment and treatments that we have introduced have attracted international attention, with many Helimed services across the world looking to adopt the Welsh model. Our heartfelt thanks go to the people of Wales for raising the £6.5m each year needed to keep the four helicopters flying. We are serving Wales and saving lives.”

Gary Doherty, BCUHB Chief Executive, said:

“We are delighted to support this development from the Wales Air Ambulance and EMRTS Cymru which will have a positive impact on critical care in North Wales.

“This specialist service will provide patients in remote and rural areas with rapid access to life saving care.

“We are pleased that this service has also helped the recruitment of emergency medicine and anaesthesia consultants into our hospitals as they were attracted by the opportunity to work for EMRTS Cymru.”