

# University's AirCare enhanced with fixed-wing, long-distance plane

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It's sleek, fast and sports a gleaming black-and-gold paint job with a Tigerhawk on the tail.



Diane Lamb and pilot Kenneth Chaplin talk shop in front of the sleek, Pilatus PC-12 turboprop which was recently placed into service to handle long-distance medical transports for UICC. Chaplin, a veteran of the commercial airline industry, has more than 30,000 flight hours and works 12-hour shifts at this hangar in Iowa City. (Photo: Dick Hakes/Special to the Press-Citizen)

More importantly, it's a fixed-wing aircraft with big life-saving potential.

It's a Pilatus PC-12 single-engine airplane, converted for medical use, now based inside a spotless hangar at the Iowa City Municipal Airport. This is a new enhancement for AirCare, the long-standing emergency and critical care flight service of the University of Iowa Hospitals & Clinics.

"With this plane," said AirCare Nurse Manager Diane Lamb, "we can get critically-ill children and adults to the University even quicker, and from longer distances."

The University's AirCare currently has three helicopters – one each stationed in Iowa City, Dubuque and Waterloo. All are busy, averaging nearly 800 flights a year transporting

patients of all ages, including neonatal and pediatric patients. UIHC can launch one aloft with full medical staff support in about seven minutes.

But beyond a 125-150-mile range, the helicopters lose some effectiveness, Lamb said. The hospital saw a need to get critically-ill patients to Iowa City faster from the far corners of the state, or even from nearby states, up to 700 miles from Iowa City.

This Swiss-made turboprop does the job. It can be airborne with a full medical crew in 30 minutes and cruises at 310 MPH, compared to about 240 MPH for the helicopters. It can handle rougher weather than its rotary counterparts, plus offers more room for staff to attend to patients and even allows a family member to ride along. There are four passenger seats, plus one for the pilot.



**Critical care medical staff have more room to work on patients inside the fixed wing craft, as demonstrated by nurses Hana Molinari (left) and Kate Shelangoski in this photo. (Photo: Contributed photo from UIHC)**

When called to service, the plane lands at an airport nearest the transporting and receiving hospital, which delivers patients to the aircraft by ground ambulance.

Although the service is new and has only made a few flights so far, Lamb said it rushed a critically-ill pediatric patient from Chicago here in an hour, when a ground ambulance would have required five. University flight staff also did a special transport from Tennessee to Kansas when other medical air transportation was not available.

“Pediatrics is a big part of this,” Lamb said. “We have one of the few neonatal/pediatric flight teams in the state.”

The AirCare plane is said to be more cost effective for longer distances, but that does not mean the equipment is inexpensive. Its full-time mechanic, Brian Lewis, estimated the 20-year-old plane’s current value at more than \$3 million, with a new aircraft costing twice that much.

All aircraft, pilots and mechanics are furnished under a contract with Air Methods, a Colorado company. Pilots for the new plane work 12-hour shifts, living in special quarters at the Iowa City airport hangar.

UIHC provides the critical care nurses, pediatric-trained respiratory therapists and regular flight paramedics who accompany all flights, including helicopters. Lamb says that includes a total staff of about 45, who also work in hospital departments when not in flight.

“We’re ready to get the word out about this new resource for Iowa and surrounding states,” she concluded. “Between the medical staff and flight crew, we have a great team.”

AirCare was established here in 1979 as the state’s first “air ambulance” and has since transported nearly 35,000 patients.



Hawkeye colors and the University of Iowa Stead Family Children’s Hospital logo are part of the unique paint job identifying the new AirCare plane. (Photo: Dick Hakes/Special to the Press-Citizen)