

35 years of innovation propel MercyOne Air Med into future

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Clive, Iowa – When Mercy Air Life first launched from its helipad in November 1986, a new chapter in trauma and emergency care came to life. Working as one and using the innovation of rapid transport, the first air mission required emergency heart care – saving a Granger man’s life.

Now called [MercyOne Air Med](#), the flight program is celebrating its 35th anniversary since lifting off in Des Moines. Flight nurse Jeff Johnston has cared for patients since the beginning. He says change and innovation have been constants in improving care. Being a part of advancements in care and aviation technology have made each day exciting and different.

“Hospital-based air transport for trauma and emergency care was relatively new in central Iowa,” said Johnston. “Beginning a flight program was bold and took faith that lives could be saved by getting patients to care quickly. This decision has improved or saved countless lives.”

From the beginning, working as one to deliver personalized care has been vital for patients and the flight team. This was very clear to Johnston, remembering a multi-vehicle crash on I-35 south of Ames.

“The crash pinned a semi-truck driver in his vehicle and he needed care,” shared Johnston. “After landing, a state trooper took me to Ames for blood supplies. When we got back, fire crews were working to free him. Along with another flight team member, we were able to reach the driver, start a blood transfusion and monitor him. We flew him for care, and he survived his life-changing injuries.” Johnston made sure to check on him during his recovery.

To further personalize quality care to meet patient needs, MercyOne developed dedicated care teams including a pediatric transport team and a neonatal transport team. Using specialized skills and technology, these teams safely transport children in need of critical care services.

MercyOne had a strong relationship with helicopter provider Air Methods and manufacturer Bell Helicopter. The Des Moines flight team worked with Bell to design the cabin of its new Bell 429 for patient care. The first 429 medical helicopter in the world went into service in Des Moines in 2010. Cruising at 170 mph, it allowed coverage of much of Iowa. A second 429 was added in Knoxville.

The continued need for trauma and emergency transport led to the decision to integrate with excellent helicopter programs developed at [MercyOne North Iowa Medical Center](#) in Mason City and [MercyOne Siouxland Medical Center](#) in Sioux City. Today five 429s fly MercyOne patients throughout Iowa transporting nearly 1,500 patients each year.

“The speed of the helicopter has helped improve time to treatment for many traumas and emergencies,” said MercyOne Air Med Director Dan Johnson. “We are continually reviewing our care protocols with regional flight teams and their physician medical directors. Together, we standardize our care to make it the safest and best possible.”

Always innovating, the team developed a new process during the COVID-19 pandemic to transport patients needing external life support to breathe. The care known as [ECMO](#), involves a surgically-attached device that removes and oxygenates a patient’s blood, then returns the blood to the patient’s body. Working along with an ambulance, a transport protocol allows patients to be flown or driven for advanced critical care.

“ECMO transport is definitely a game changer,” says MercyOne Des Moines Ambulance and Communications Program Manager Lamar Hudson. “The ability to transport ECMO patients by air or ground ambulance has given people another care opportunity when they need it most.”

Today, seeing white and green MercyOne Air Med helicopters isn’t unusual. People look to the sky and know someone is in good hands. Onboard, the passion and delivery of advanced compassionate and personalized care remains the focus of the flight team – during their patient’s greatest time of need – providing critical care in critical moments.

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About MercyOne

[MercyOne](#) is a connected system of health care facilities and services dedicated to helping people and communities live their best life. MercyOne’s care providers and staff make health the highest priority. The system’s clinics, medical centers, hospitals and affiliates are located throughout the state of Iowa and beyond. Headquartered in central Iowa, MercyOne was founded in 1998 through a collaboration between CommonSpirit Health and Trinity Health – two of the country’s foremost, not-for-profit Catholic health organizations.

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