

CalStar provides link from accidents to specialized care

By Stephen Ward

In 1983, Dr. Donald Trunkey, an innovative physician with a dream to help injured patients regardless of their financial constraints, formed the California Shock/Trauma Air Rescue service.

Since then, CalStar has helped the Tahoe area provide quick transportation to nearby hospitals, with more than 3,000 transports since Tahoe's CalStar-6 base opened in 2001.

Bryan Pond, a 47-year-old Meyers resident, has been with CalStar for more than 10 years. He works with a 5,500-pound, 28-foot long Eurocopter B0 105, capable of going 149mph, with a rotor span of more than 32 feet.



Landing on highways is normal for Calstar so patients are taken to hospitals faster.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

The nonprofit medical flight service's purpose is to get people with traumatic injuries to the nearest hospital as soon as possible.

Pond said the numbers haven't fluctuated much within the last few years, with this year's 247-patient transports being considered average.

"The most common accident we deal with are car wrecks," Pond said. "In the winters, we have skiers we need to help, and in the summer there are boating accidents. I'd say that car wrecks are the types of accidents we deal with most, though."

Something that sets the organization apart is that it flies two critical air nurses rather than the normal regime of one nurse and one paramedic.

CalStar doesn't just transport people to and from hospitals. The organization also helps agencies such as Lake Valley Fire Department with wildfires and during inclement weather, and is featured at Barton Health's annual skills lab to help inform medics and nurses about the latest technology within their field.

Carson Tahoe Regional Medical Center partnered with CalStar in 2008 to install rescue vehicles with portable EKG devices. With the device, the EKG technology can determine the precise location of the abnormal blood flow to the heart by transmitting a 12-lead electrocardiogram image, which is instantly transmitted to the staff at CTRMC to prepare for the patient's arrival. The technology has been incredibly helpful and the relationship between CTRMC and CalStar continues to be a strong one, according to CTRMC spokesman Jon Tyler.

Medical centers such as Barton Health use CalStar not only to receive patients, but also to transport them to other hospitals if their conditions require extensive help.

Karla Peterson, the base hospital coordinator who has been

working for Barton for more than 18 years, considers CalStar to be an integral part of the hospital.

“As a small hospital, we need to be able to take anyone in,” Peterson said. “However, we are aware of our limited resources and need to have a way to transport patients that need more help. If we didn’t have them, we’d be in trouble.”

Nicole Shearer, public relations business partner at Renown Medical Center in Reno, also considers the air ambulance service a commodity.

“Renown Health has a good partnership with CalStar,” Shearer said. “As the only Level II Trauma Center between Sacramento and Salt Lake City, services like those offered by CalStar help Renown’s rural patients get the care they need.”

Today, the company has more than eight full-time bases and has an abundance of helicopters and planes in its fleet, including four MD 902 Explorer helicopters and a Cessna 421.

CalStar is continuing to assist the Northern California region, with the South Lake Tahoe outfit striving to maintain close relations with the hospitals it partners with.

CalStar has a membership program that will cut the cost if their service is ever needed. Information is on CalStar’s website.