



Features

Chroniques

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Manitoba crash a wake-up call for “fly-in” physicians

David Square

In brief

A DECEMBER PLANE CRASH IN NORTHERN MANITOBA served to remind the province’s “fly-in” physicians of the perils their work may entail. Four people were killed and 13 injured in the crash, which left Dr. Gerry Huot in serious condition in a Winnipeg hospital. The accident caused a serious head injury, and 4 months later he remains in hospital. It is causing some physicians to rethink their travel plans.

En bref

UN ÉCRASEMENT D’AVION SURVENU EN DÉCEMBRE DANS LE NORD DU MANITOBA a rappelé aux médecins «aéroportés» de la province les dangers de leur travail. L’accident a fait 4 morts et 13 blessés, dont le Dr Gerry Huot qui, atteint d’une grave blessure à la tête, s’est retrouvé dans un hôpital de Winnipeg. Quatre mois plus tard, il est toujours hospitalisé. L’accident a porté certains médecins à repenser leurs déplacements.

An airplane crash in northern Manitoba that left a physician critically injured was a wake-up call for the staff of the University of Manitoba’s Northern Medical Unit (NMU), some of Manitoba’s fly-in physicians say.

“It may sound crazy,” said Dr. Grant Stefanyshen of the NMU, “but after Gerry was injured I started to wear a motorcycle helmet while flying.”

Dr. Gerry Huot, a fly-in doctor with the NMU, remains in serious condition in the Winnipeg Health Sciences Centre with a major head injury, the result of an air crash near Little Grand Rapids in December. “We were stunned by the accident,” said Dr. Bruce Martin, associate director of the NMU. “Gerry was a member of the NMU family and an intensely dedicated physician.”

Huot was aboard a Sowind aircraft that plunged into the bush outside the small Aboriginal community of Little Grand Rapids while on a regularly scheduled flight from St. Andrew’s airport, 20 km north of Winnipeg. Little Grand Rapids is 300 km northeast of Winnipeg near the Manitoba–Ontario border.

Dr. Bob Cronin, a fly-in physician who travels to a remote community about 400 km northeast of Winnipeg on Mondays and returns Thursdays, said the December crash that killed 4 people and injured 13 has made him rethink his job.

“This is the third major accident in the same area in 12 months,” said Cronin, who was working at St. Therese Point when a helicopter ferrying people to the airport crashed beside the local nursing station. He worries that his insurance is insufficient to provide care for his wife and 3 children should he be involved in a similar accident while working.

Martin said the University of Manitoba had reviewed its travel policy prior to the Little Grand Rapids crash.

Dr. Bruce Martin photos



Dr. Bruce Martin of the Northern Medical Unit boards a Yukon helicopter in Garden Hill, Man.



Northern health care workers arrive in Paungassi, Man.

“We think the university’s comprehensive policy more than adequately reimburses doctors, students and other medical staff who are permanently disabled or killed in a travel accident,” Martin said.

The policy would pay around \$800 000 to the family of a physician killed because of work-related travel and double that amount to a married person who is permanently disabled. Same-sex partnerships are also recognized by the policy.

“We encourage our staff to purchase extra insurance from the Manitoba Medical Association, the College of Family Physicians of Canada or a private insurer such as Paul Revere Insurance,” said Martin. “Our travel policy does not address the issue of short-term reversible injuries.”

Dr. Wendy Smith, who flies weekly to Garden Hill, a village near St. Therese Point, is expecting a child and said the Little Grand Rapids catastrophe served as a wake-up call about the dangers faced by fly-in physicians. “I guess I’ve always taken flying for granted — it comes with the job. But now I ask Bob [Cronin] to get me a weather report before I fly anywhere.”

Smith experienced a close call while on a flight from Repulse Bay to Churchill when 1 of her plane’s 2 engines caught fire. “I looked out the window and saw smoke and flame on the wing,” Smith recalled. “A minute later a flight attendant told us that the flight had been diverted to Rankin Inlet and we would be landing with only 1 engine.”

Cronin, a Cessna pilot and former aviation physician with Transport Canada, said most accidents occur because pilots break rules regarding the weather. He considers the Little Grand Rapids crash an example of this type of problem. “After his first failure to land, the pilot probably

should have returned to Winnipeg,” he said. “But he decided to make another attempt and it proved fatal.”

According to weather reports at the time of the crash, the ceiling was low and visibility was obscured by fog and sleet.

Dr. Perry Gall, who flies to most of the communities serviced by the NMU, now travels with a barometer so he can check the weather before departing. “I guess the Little Grand Rapids crash made us all realize we’re not as immortal as we thought,” he said. “I used to take chances and fly in some pretty terrible weather. But now I wait until the weather clears, even if it means waiting 24 hours.”

Gall said that although the weather is a significant factor in air crashes, flights into remote areas face additional problems such as having deer or moose crossing a runway as a plane attempts to land.

Stefanyshen is glad that most of his travel is to the drive-in communities of Easterville and Grand Rapids, which are north of Winnipeg on Highway 6. “They say flying is safer than driving, but I’m not convinced,” he said. ☺