

Doctors face special challenges during in-flight emergencies

USA TODAY - Doctors traveling as airline passengers are often called upon to assist if a medical emergency occurs in flight. Though flight attendants are trained in CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) and airplanes are generally equipped with first aid kits, the contents of those medical kits can vary greatly from airline to airline, according to a recent article in the New York Times.

According to the article, there are no statistics for the actual number of medical emergencies that occur in flight, as the Federal Aviation Administration does not track in-flight medical episodes and airlines are not required to report them. MedAire, a company that advises more than 60 airlines on in-flight medical emergencies, reports that out of 19,000 cases they handled for commercial airlines last year, 442 were serious enough to warrant diverting the airplane and 94 people died onboard.

The Times article reports that, although most doctors want to help when a medical emergency occurs in flight, many are hesitant to try to treat a stranger with an unknown medical history. Additionally, doctors traveling as passengers don't have access to many of the necessary tools or resources readily available on the ground and they never know what is included in the first aid kit aboard that airplane since there are no standards for these kits.

Many doctors, traveling as passengers, may also be specialists who don't normally treat the malady affecting that particular patient and many are concerned about the possibility of legal action if they are unsuccessful in being able to help the patient, despite applicable protection under Good Samaritan laws.

The Times article says pilots can generally obtain advice from physicians on the ground if a medical emergency occurs in flight, but airlines have been calling upon doctors on the passenger list to help with in-flight medical emergencies since the dawn of aviation.

Unfortunately, because of this serendipitous relationship airlines have with physicians traveling aboard airplanes, the kind of medical advice and care available to a passenger might vary greatly from flight to flight.