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Copter gives patients flight of their lives

Hospitals Dominican Hospital Hospitales

By TOM LONG

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SANTA CRUZ — Cynthia Forney's head is in the clouds a good part of the time. But Forney isn't daydreaming; she's saving lives.

Forney, a nurse, works in the Life Flight helicopter that whisks patients from community hospitals to either Stanford Medical Center or the Santa Clara Valley Medical Center for special treatment.

"It's kind of like doing intensive care work 3,000 feet in the air," Forney said. Indeed, 95 percent of the patients she has to deal with are in critical condition: burn patients, those with severe spinal injuries, coronary care patients who need immediate and advanced treatment, victims of auto accidents, people who've lost a limb. These are the types of people Forney takes care of in the clouds.

Wednesday was a bit of a break in her normal schedule. She and the Life Flight helicopter and about 50 other guests were at Dominican Hospital to help dedicate the hospital's new helipad.

Dominican began transferring patients by helicopter from a helipad in 1975. In 1981, hospital expansion



Pete Amos/Sentinel

Cynthia Forney

Job keeps her head in clouds

forced the closing of the original helipad, and since then, the helicopters have had to land in a reserved area of the hospital's parking lot.

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Life flight

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Now the copters have a pad of their own again. Four different helicopter programs touch down at Dominican — the Coast Guard's rescue team, the Department of Forestry's copter, Life Flight and another medical helicopter program, Cal-star.

Watsonville Community Hospital also uses helicopters, and is working on a helipad.

Only the Life Flight and Cal-star helicopters are used to fly patients to another hospital. The Cal-star aircraft carry two nurses along with the pilot; the Life Flight helicopters have one nurse and a doctor.

"With this new heliport our patients are only minutes away from some of the finest medical care available in the world," Dominican president Sister Julie Hyer told those gathered for the dedication. "The potential of this helipad for providing service is awesome."

Awesome is the word for it. To offer a better sense of just how efficient this airborne intensive care unit is, Forney and pilot Steve Greene hoisted crews of reporters and dignitaries into the wild blue yonder for a practice run up to Stanford.

The helicopter's interior is an organized jumble of instruments, tubes, blankets and gizmos. It is equipped to handle two patients at a time, and travels a radius from Stanford that stretches east to Lake Tahoe, south to San Luis Obispo and north to Fort Bragg.

Forney sat back on the stretcher, usually reserved for patients, and said, "This is my working environment, I'm pretty used to it." And, indeed, as the copter bumped, dipped and generally beat its way through the air, she acted as relaxed as if she were in someone's living room.

"Noise can be a big factor up here," she shouted over the copter's constant rattle and shake. "A lot of the time we can't hear well enough

to take blood pressure or monitor a patient's chest sounds."

So instead of relying on ears, the helicopter has a number of digital monitoring devices that keep Forney in touch with a patient's condition. "Usually the patient has a headset as well," she said, so he can communicate electronically with others in the helicopter.

Not that there's a lot of time for light conversation on these trips. Speed is the name of the medical air-transport game, and this helicopter moves very fast. Whipping along at 145 miles per hour, about 3,000 feet up in the air, the helicopter made it from Dominican to Stanford in just more than 12 minutes.

"The most challenging patient up here is a patient having a lot of problems at once," Forney said. "And trauma patients. With trauma patients we have to move very fast."

Ditto when it comes to patients who've lost a limb or finger and are being rushed to Stanford in hopes of reimplantation. "You have several hours with some things," Forney said. "But with others you have a lot less."

Forney's is not exactly a low-pressure job, nor is it very consistent. She and five other nurses rotate in 12-hour shifts. Four full-time physicians are in a similar rotation.

Life Flight averages about 40 calls a month, two or three of which may be to Dominican. All the nurses are highly trained, most having been in other flight programs, all being certified in advanced cardiac life support and as mobile intensive care nurses.

There's a buzz to the job that Forney and others apparently find somewhat addictive. "It's a job that for most people is very important and they just don't leave it," she said. "I left the program I was with before this one to teach for a while, but I came back to this."

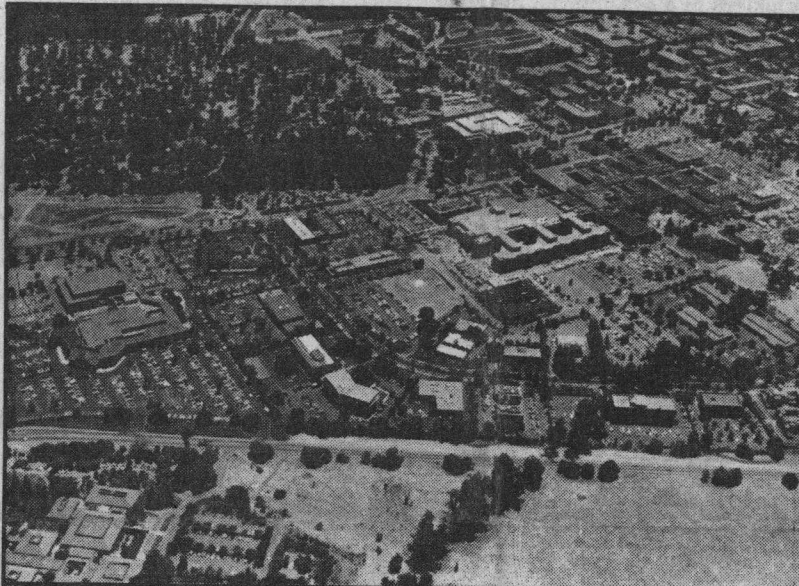
Using aircraft for medical emergencies dates back to the Prussian

War, where hot-air balloons were used to airlift casualties to hospitals. Airplanes served a similar purpose for years. The use of helicopters became common in the early '70s as a result of their success in Vietnam.

Now the helicopters are in a dif-

ferent kind of war, a war against trauma and heart disease and accidental injury, a war against time. And a war that's won a good deal of the time.

Which is what keeps Forney's head in the clouds.



Stanford Hospital is Life Flight's destination.



The interior is an organized jumble of equipment.



Dominican's heliport was dedicated Wednesday.



Steve Greene pilots the helicopter, which whips along at 145 mph at 3,000 feet over the mountains.

Photos by Pete Amos