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Off Central: Arizona nurse pioneers treatment for in-air medical emergencies

BY CORBIN CARSON | March 6, 2017 @ 5:15 am



MedAire founder Joan Sullivan Garrett. (KTAR Photo/Corbin Carson)

Whether a passenger suffers a heart attack during take-off, stops breathing over the Pacific Ocean or passes out at 40,000 feet, most airlines around the globe turn to the Phoenix-based medical group MedAire for help.

The company answers more than 100 calls regarding in-flight medical emergencies per day and has answered about 40,000 calls last year alone.

But [MedAire](#) founder Joan Sullivan Garrett said one call in 1983 started it all.

"We were scrambled for a rollover accident in the San Tan Mountains," Garrett recalled. "We're told that we had a pediatric patient, and some teenagers and [the child had been] thrown from the vehicle."

Garrett, who was an emergency flight nurse on a helicopter crew at the time, said her crew made their way to the scene, where they encountered paramedics who said the boy was in a stable condition.

But Garrett stressed that the boy's body could appear to be OK on the outside, while masking internal injuries.

"We argued with [the on-scene paramedics]," she said. "But there are protocols in place. The person on the scene has control."

So Garrett and her team turned back, barely touching ground at the hospital when they received a second call that said the child had taken a turn for the worse and that they needed to head back.

Suddenly, what was originally a 20-minute flight had turned into a 40-minute response. Those minutes were crucial, and the little boy would eventually pay the price.

"We land the helicopter on the scene and I take the child," Garrett said of the boy, who was lying in the front seat of the pickup truck, with just breaths to spare.

Garrett said she could immediately tell that the boy had torn a bronchial tube, the main airway to the lungs. She told the boy she would have to start an IV, but he told her he was ready.

"I'm tough," the little boy told Garrett.

Garrett said she knew he was fading fast — and the boy knew it too. The boy reached up and grabbed Garrett's flight suit and said, "I'm not afraid ... and I love you."

With tears in her eyes, Garrett explained the harrowing events of that day: How she was able to get the boy on the ground and transported to a nearby trauma center, where he later died.

As a mother herself, Garrett said she was traumatized by the boy's last words and worked to track down the boy's mother to relay his message to her.

"I told her verbatim what he said," she said. "And that he sent a message through me that he loved her. We were both crying."

The boy's death changed her, Garrett said, and for the next few years, she could not escape a single thought: Basic emergency medical treatment should be available to everyone, no matter where they are.

And that was the thought that sparked the idea for MedAire, Garrett said.

"I immediately thought of the airlines," she said. "I found out they had nothing but BandAids in their kits. No gloves. No medicine. No stethoscope. No nothing."

Even if someone on a flight with medical training volunteered in an emergency, they did not have the necessary tools to assist them with basic medical needs.

And that's when it hit her: "I'm going to design a medical kit," Garrett said. "I'm going to put gloves in there and pocket masks and the drugs that are suggested for increasing the capability on board commercial airlines."

Garrett then spent a few years building these kits out of her home, searching for the funding to take her product to major airlines.

But that's not all the response center does.

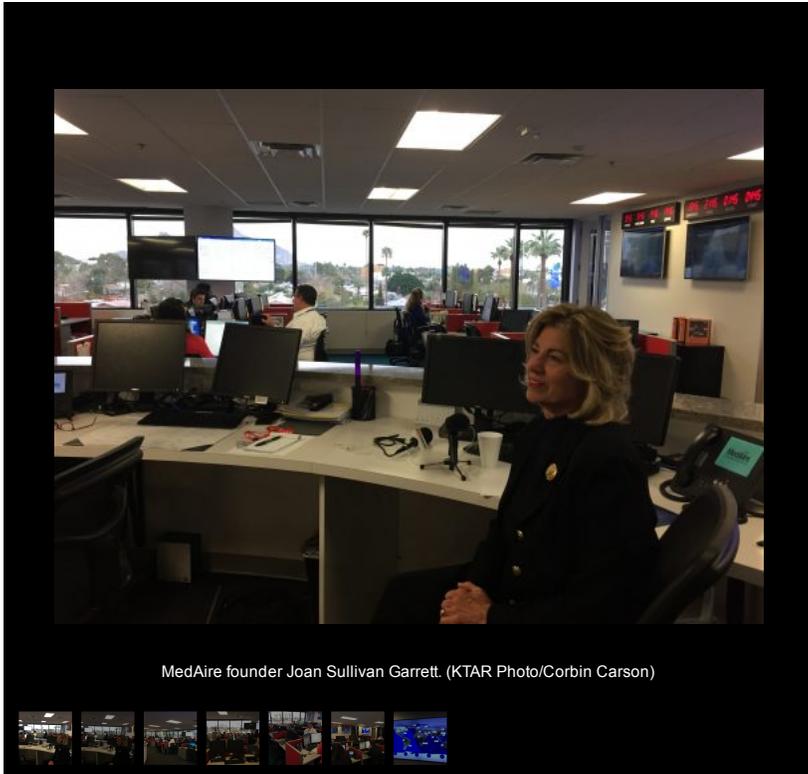
MedLink also amassed more than a decade's worth of in-flight data that showed people were needlessly dying on airplanes. In the past, people who passed away on airplanes were pronounced dead once they reached a hospital, which data on in-flight deaths was not being tracked.

But Garrett knew there was something she could do in order to enhance response times for in-air emergency situations — so she went to Congress.

"I had to testify before Congress to show them why they needed to increase the [medical] kits and why they needed to have defibrillators on the aircraft," she said.

As a result, the Federal Aviation Administration released a regulation in 2001 that required U.S. airlines to carry automated external defibrillators and enhanced emergency medical kits on all domestic and international flights.

So today, if you ever find yourself in an emergency situation while on an airline, you can thank the single mother who began her nursing career at Mesa Community College.



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