

Call in the air taxi for an overseas injury

CHRIS MORRIS

FREDERICTON

THE CANADIAN PRESS

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 2, 2008

This article was published more than 13 years ago. Some information may no longer be current.

There were times when Bonnie Lewis had given up almost all hope of ever seeing her son, Robert, alive again.

Robert Lewis, 54, had experienced a nightmare scenario of surgical mishaps after he entered a hospital in Thailand for what should have been a routine hernia operation in 2006.

After enduring a perforated bowel, months of pain, a stroke and a coma, all Mr. Lewis wanted to do once he regained consciousness earlier this year was come home to Canada.

That's when the "Angels" stepped in to help.

"If it hadn't been for the Angels of Flight, I tell you he'd still be over there and I would surely have lost him," a tearful Ms. Lewis said in an interview from Peterborough, Ont. "They brought my son home. They brought him home."

Mr. Lewis recently returned to Canada on a flight arranged by Angels of Flight Canada Inc., a Peterborough-based business that coordinates medical transfers for people within Canada and in other countries.

The company, founded by nurse Gail Courneyea in 1988, also helped find a bed for Mr. Lewis in a local hospital, despite the fact his Ontario medicare coverage had lapsed.

Ms. Courneyea says that although Angels of Flight is a business, it does help people on a charitable basis.

"People do travel a lot, and they don't realize that when they get sick they have no way to get home because provincial health insurance will not cover transportation outside their own provinces," she says. "We work with people whether they have money or not."

The company is one of a network of aviation services now available to people with medical issues who need to get home, or who must travel long distances for treatments and tests.

While Angels of Flight will provide medical staff to accompany a sick traveller, it doesn't have airplanes of its own. Instead, it coordinates flights on commercial airlines and air ambulances to get people to their destinations.

"It's becoming a challenge," Ms. Courneyea says, noting that there are now fewer airlines, and that rules are tightening about handling sick people.

In addition, there are small fleets of volunteer planes and pilots popping up in various parts of the country to offer a kind of air taxi to people who must travel long distances for medical treatment, especially those living in remote, rural areas.

Ontario-based Hope Air uses volunteers flying their own planes, as well as donated air miles and seats from airline partners.

In Alberta, a relatively new service called Angel Flight Alberta relies on a network of volunteer pilots to help people with long-distance medical appointments.

The small planes cannot accommodate the critically ill.

"We're basically taking the walking wounded," said Kerry Pawluski, founder of Angel Flight Alberta.