Special skills in: Pre-Hospital Emergency Medicine (PHEM)

Pre-hospital emergency medicine is a distinct branch of intensive care / anaesthetics / Emergency medicine that involves the provision of emergency critical care to patients outside of a hospital. It is a specialist role requiring a unique set of competencies and experience. I became involved as a junior doctor with a scheme which was attached to the hospital I was working in at the time. It helped shape my future career decision to train in intensive care and anaesthesia as there is a lot of cross over.

There are a variety of different ways in which pre-hospital care is provided, from voluntary BASICS schemes, motorsport and event medicine through to helicopter emergency medical services. I have worked in systems which provide a team to the scene of an incident- usually a critical care paramedic / doctor team, but many voluntary schemes rely on doctors driving themselves to incidents. Helicopter Emergency medical services are mainly charities in the UK and many employ doctors to cover day shifts. I took a year of OOPE to work with an air ambulance system, but other trainees may opt for shorter OOPE or to combine ICM training with PHEM training to gain formal subspecialty accreditation.

What PHEM involves

A typical HEMS shift starts with an early drive to an airbase - usually a fair way out of town! Morning routines consist of preparing equipment, kitting up the aircraft and a robust series of checklists to ensure medical, communication and aviation equipment is all present and functioning correctly. Busy services will see between 5 and six cases per day, of which 2-3 may require critical care intervention. This typically involves the provision of an anaesthetic to a critically ill or injured adult / child, the provision of high quality analgesia and occasionally the need to perform invasive focused surgical procedures, such as thoracotomy or amputation. After each mission, there is a lot of paperwork, cleaning and debriefing to be done.

The obvious advantage PHEM training has for an intensive care trainee is confidence and experience at undertaking transfers in a critically ill and injured group of patients of all ages in a number of different vehicles. However, there are a number of other experiences / qualities PHEM training brings out in people, such as personal resilience, an understanding of human factors and team-resource management practices and also how to manage priorities when they might be conflicting - just like a night shift in a full ICU!

Advice for interested trainees

Those considering involvement should make an early decision about whether they want to combine an ICM career with PHEM training. The Inter-collegiate board for Training in Pre-hospital medicine (ICBTPHEM) has a website with regular updates regarding recruitment which is via competitive national application during Stage 1 training, for a programme commencement in Stage 2 training. Be warned, there is a fitness test!

It is also possible to combine some Dual CCT programmes (anaesthesia or Emergency medicine) with PHEM as a sub-specialty but this will extend training time further. FICM recommends that, “any trainee already undertaking Dual CCTs in ICM and a partner specialty who also wished to apply for PHEM sub-specialty recognition should have the explicit support of their Postgraduate Dean before applying for PHEM”.
For those who would prefer an OOPE-type experience, many air ambulances can provide opportunities for six-twelve month attachments, for which the trainee should look to get prospective faculty approval.

Dr Matt O'Meara

Useful resources

www.ibtphem.org.uk