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ABSTRACT

Medical evacuation is a vital part of health care delivery in Maldives as it is not economical to have tertiary hospitals in all 87 islands due to limited resources, vast scattering of the islands over a geographic area and unevenness in population distribution. Initially, Ministry of Health established a referral system and speed crafts were attached to hospitals to evacuate the patients within the atolls. However, this evacuation system did not work smoothly because most of the time these speed crafts were not in a running condition. Further, there was no central authority to manage the operation resulting Coast Guard of Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) to take up the burden for such cases. Hence, the system was too costly and ineffective to be operated successfully. Therefore, in 2014 the government decided to turn towards a centralized evacuation system of Sea Ambulance service.

Having understood the challenges and limitations associated with this vital service, the researcher aimed to study the current Sea Ambulance operations in order to establish a sustainable medical evacuation service that is applicable to Maldives. The researcher further set objectives to study the safe and effective methods including factors affecting emergency medical evacuations and international standards that can be followed by MNDF in Sea Ambulance operations. The researcher used qualitative survey and the respondents for this study were stake holders involved in medical evacuation especially in Sea Ambulance operations.

The study results revealed that MNDF have done a commendable job to provide this vital service during the last four years and was able to attend 90% of the requests which were required for urgent medical evacuations (over 2800 trips annually) between the health facilities. However, a few vital gaps exist in the system and the current crafts were found to be unsuitable and not ideal to evacuate patients to far distances especially in rough weather conditions.

The study affirms that the current Sea Ambulance service is an essential part of health care delivery system especially an integral part of Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and pre-hospital care for countries like Maldives and other maritime nations.