

# Are physicians obligated to help on planes?

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"Even though I have been away from the direct responsibility for the care of patients for a long time, I think that I have been able to evaluate and take care of most situations that I have encountered or to defer to others who were more capable when they were available," explains author Gregory L. Eastwood, M.D., from the Center for Bioethics and Humanities at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, N.Y.

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(HealthDay)—Does being a physician carry a moral obligation to respond to calls for medical assistance on airplanes? That is the topic of an article published in the Sept. 12 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

It is estimated that the incidence of in-flight medical emergencies that involve communication with experts on the ground is about one in 600 flights. In the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom, physicians do not have the legal duty to assist unless there is a prior patient-[physician](#) relationship, although in many European countries and Australia, physicians do have the legal duty to respond. In the United States, responders are protected legally with the exception of gross negligence or intentional harm.

A physicians' sense of obligation also may be affected by their discipline and recent experience (e.g., direct care of patients versus administrative role). When more than one medical professional responds, it is reasonable to quickly assess credentials and presumed abilities and allow the person who seems to be the most capable to take charge; it may be a nurse or an emergency medical technician.

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