

Letter to the Editor:

EMERGENCIES IN THE AIR AND THE CAPTAIN'S BAG

Dear Editor

Difficulties arise when a doctor on board an aircraft is called to attend to emergencies.^{1,2} My experience on a flight with Malaysian Airline System (MAS) may be of value to ease some of the difficulties encountered.

In a flight from Hongkong to Kuala Lumpur, I was called to attend to an elderly unconscious patient. He was given oxygen by mask without bagging equipment by two Swedish nurses. He was cyanosed, had occasional gasps and the pulse was irregular at 30 to 40 beats/min, felt only at the carotid; there was gross oedema of the feet. I had no idea how to resuscitate him without drugs as he barely responded to oxygen by mask. One of the nurses urged me to request for the "captain's bag" of which I heard for the first time.

The steward soon fetched the mysterious bag and the Ambu bag. The contents of the captain's bag included a stethoscope, plenty of syringes, needles, drip sets, dextrose/saline infusion bottles, and vials of adrenaline, aminophylline, digoxin, hydrocortisone, lasix, morphine, sodium carbonate, etc. The patient was ventilated with oxygen using the Ambu bag through a mouth tube and treated for acute cardiac failure; he was in a satisfactory condition when we reached Kuala

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Lumpur two hours later where he was taken over by the airport medical team.

Later, I questioned several colleagues and found that none of them knew of the "captain's bag" — the contents of which proved adequate to treat cardiac arrest, cardiac failure, bronchial asthma, myocardial infarction, etc. From previously published material,^{1,2} it is evident that, like those I questioned, many doctors are unaware of the existence of the "captain's bag" at least in some airlines.

It would be tragic if, due to failure of communication, this bag is not made available to a doctor called upon to treat a medical emergency on an aircraft. Some medical organizations should advise the airlines to take appropriate steps to ensure that this does not happen. Similarly, doctors should be aware of medico-legal implications when they oblige to treat patients abroad on an aircraft.^{3,4} To begin with, the bag should perhaps be re-named "Medical Emergency Bag".

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- 4 Editorial. Emergencies in the air. *Lancet* 1985; i : 28–29.