

AIR & SPACE

“When is an Operating Room like a Cockpit?”

>>> **DOCTORS ARE TAKING LESSONS** from pilots. Not flying lessons—instead, they're learning how to prevent hospital accidents by adopting safety techniques used by pilots. Today several major hospitals, including Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Tennessee, have hired LifeWings Partners LLC, a group of former fighter jocks and astronauts, to make hospitals as safe as the average airliner's flight deck.

LifeWings president Steve Harden and partner Alan Mullen, both pilots for Federal Express, got their start in 1992 by training Air National Guard fighter pilots in the FedEx's cockpit crew procedures. Six years ago, the director of a Memphis hospital read an article about them and called Harden. “Right away we were struck with the similarities between health care and aviation,” Harden says. “We watched what was going on in their ER and offered suggestions and tried to adjust their mindset.” The hospital director told another hospital's director, and business ballooned.

“On a commercial airliner the pilot calls out ‘flaps,’ the first officer says ‘flaps,’ and the pilot checks the flap setting to make sure it's correct,” Harden says. That's essentially what LifeWings teaches doctors. One hospital, Harden says, logged a “wrong-site surgery” —performed surgery on the wrong part of the patient—on average every 60 days. LifeWings trained the entire surgical staff to cross-check one another like an aircrew, even running through a checklist posted on the operating room wall. “If the patient is supposed to be John Smith, someone announces it, someone checks his bracelet to make sure and announces it, another checks the medical records and announces it,” he says. “That has fundamentally changed their culture.” As of last December, the hospital has logged 1,200 days without a wrong-site surgery.

This article was written by Phil Scott and first appeared in the February/March 2007 edition of Air & Space Smithsonian magazine. To read more articles from Air & Space magazine visit <http://www.airspacemag.com>.