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OPINION

COMPASS: *Points of view from the community*

Alaska needs a better trauma system

By FRANK SACCO and MARK S. JOHNSON

Alaska is much safer than it was a generation ago. From 1980 to 2004, the unintentional injury death rate dropped more than 50 percent. Without this improvement, an additional 300 Alaskans would have died in 2004. However, Alaska's 2004 rate remained 30 percent above the national average.

We are all aware of the terrible toll of cancer and cardiovascular diseases, but the leading cause of death for people younger than 44 is injury. It remains a major cause of death and disability for all age groups. For every death approximately three people are left with permanent disabilities.

As with other diseases, prevention is preferable to treatment. Alaska's dramatic reduction in injury deaths is largely attributable to prevention, including use of child restraints and safety belts, reduced rates of drunken driving, and increased use of personal flotation devices. Though prevention is paramount, we also must be prepared to provide the best possible care for those who become injured.

A trauma system is an organized, state-coordinated effort to deliver the full spectrum of care to injured people. The integration of EMS systems, public safety agencies, air medical services and health care facilities ensures that patients receive the most efficient, effective care possible from time of injury through rehabilitation. Trauma systems have been shown to reduce death from injury by as much as 25 percent and are recognized as an integral part of a state's EMS and disaster response system.

According to a 2004 Harris poll, most people want a comprehensive trauma system in their area. Throughout the United States, 83 percent of those surveyed felt a trauma system was as essential as having a fire department and 80 percent were willing to pay extra for it. Interestingly, though 75 percent thought there was a trauma system in their state, only eight states have fully functioning systems and 15 states have



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no system.

Where do we stand? In 1993, the Alaska Legislature provided authority to the Department of Health and Social Services to verify and certify trauma centers. The statute does not require, or provide incentives for, hospital participation. It does state that no hospital can represent itself as a trauma center unless certified by the state.

Regulations adopted in 1996 require trauma centers to meet standards developed by the American College of Surgeons. Four levels are recognized, from Level I (highest) to Level IV (trauma stabilization facility). There are adequate medical resources to establish Level II trauma centers in Anchorage. In addition, it is feasible to establish Level III and IV centers throughout the state. Because of long transport times, centers of all levels are essential for improving outcomes.

Since the statute and regulations were enacted, only three of 24 eligible hospitals have successfully completed the verification and certification process. (Alaska Native Medical Center — Level II, Yukon-Kuskokwim Regional and Norton Sound Regional Hospitals — Level IV).

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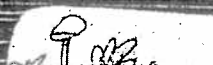
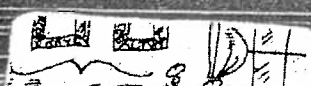
Johnson

times when critical specialties such as neurosurgery and vascular surgery have been unavailable for emergencies, necessitating transfer of some critical patients to Seattle.

Here are four steps to improve trauma care in Alaska:

1. Residents need to let legislators know that quality trauma care is important.
 2. The Legislature should put teeth and incentives in the current statute. Successful approaches in other states include requiring trauma center certification at some level as a condition for hospital licensing and limiting medical liability for injuries treated at trauma centers.
 3. Tertiary hospitals should ensure availability of critical sub-specialists 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
 4. Local EMS and medical providers should organize regional trauma systems and integrate them with the statewide system.
- Developing a comprehensive statewide trauma system, and expanding injury prevention efforts, will make Alaska a safer, healthier place to live.

■ Dr. Frank Sacco is chief of surgery at the Alaska Native Medical Center and chairman of the Alaska Chapter of American College of Surgeons Committee on Trauma. Mark S. Johnson was chief of Emergency Medical Services in the Department of Health and Social Services from 1979 until he retired in 2004.



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