E.R.

By Alberto Iovino

For family reasons, I happen to be acquainted with the first aid emergency protocol for the management of pulmonary oedema. ...

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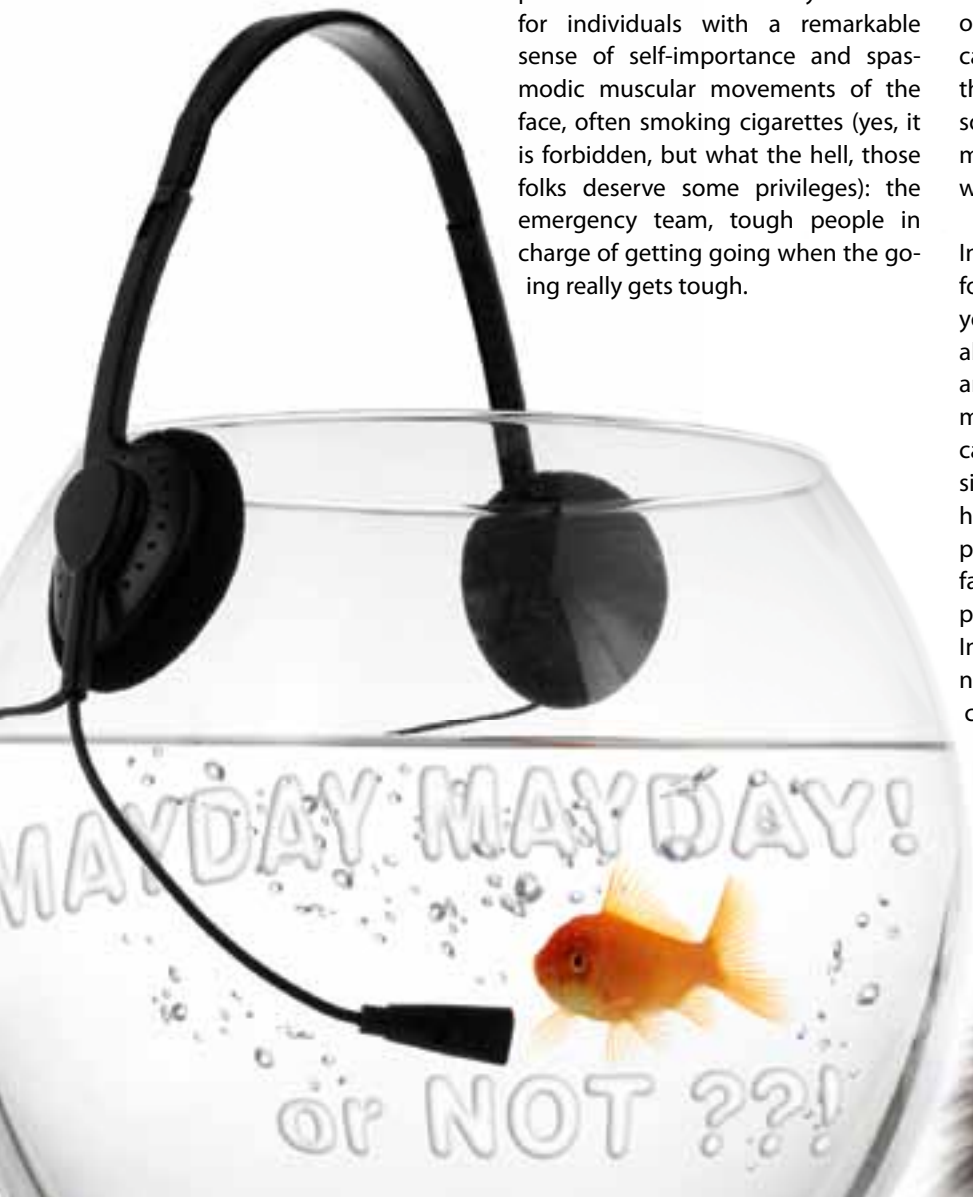
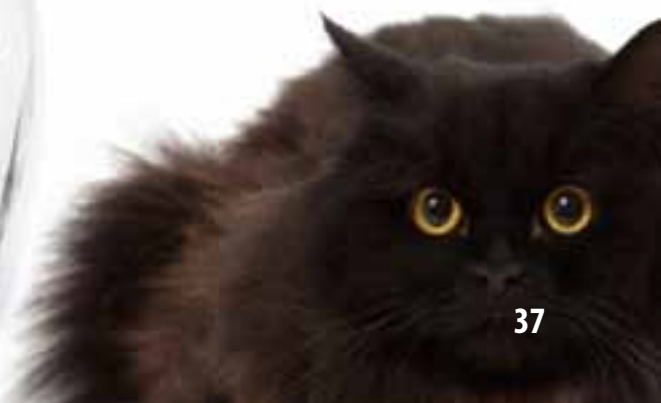
The relevant list of actions is sometimes deployed on posters, hung on a wall in the emergency room, so that, if you were allowed inside, you might watch patient and doctor fighting their way through life and death right under the list of actions which are supposed to be taken in such a circumstance. Amazingly, you would be able to follow the meaning of most of what you would see, as it would perfectly correspond to what you could read behind what was happening. Or possibly not, and this might, incidentally, be among the reasons why you would not actually be allowed inside.

Emergency rooms are, by definition, places where people deal with emergencies. From an ATC perspective, it is as if, in a corner of control towers and control centres, a couple of working positions were consistently reserved for individuals with a remarkable sense of self-importance and spasmodic muscular movements of the face, often smoking cigarettes (yes, it is forbidden, but what the hell, those folks deserve some privileges): the emergency team, tough people in charge of getting going when the going really gets tough.

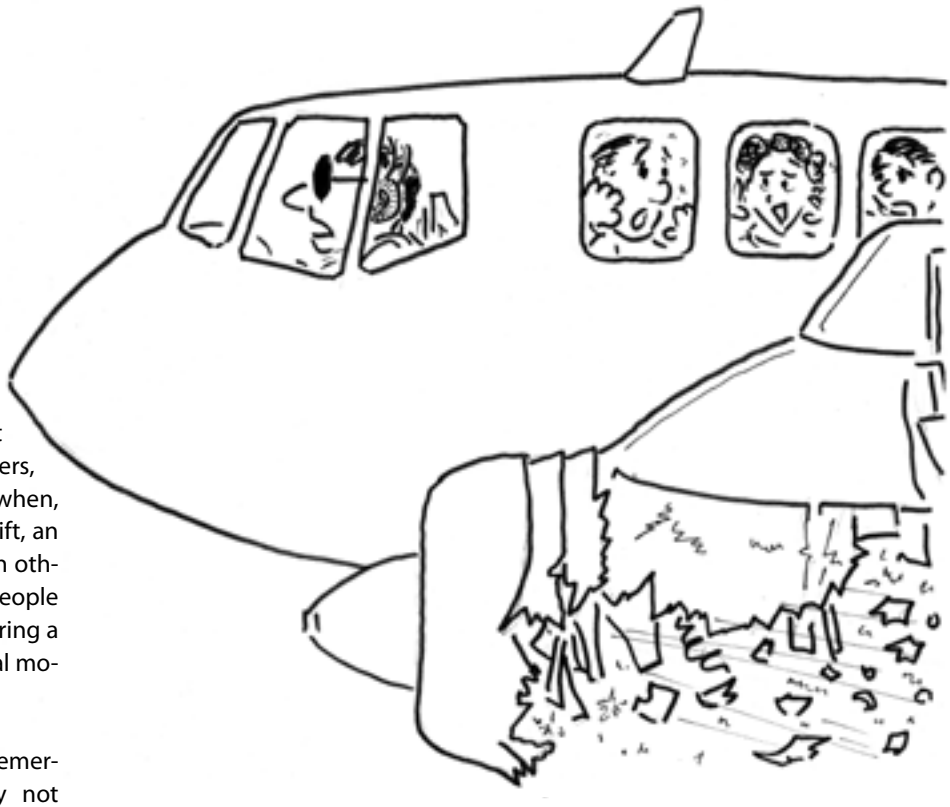


I have no knowledge of any provider organised in this way, for reasons that can be quite easily presumed. On the other hand, if the idea somehow sounded appealing to you, then it might be worthwhile asking ourselves why.

In an emergency, you feel more comfortable when handled by someone you consider a specialist. One may be able to become so through training and experience; an emergency team member would be somebody specifically trained to deal with emergency situations beyond the average of his/her colleagues, having had the opportunity to become more and more familiar with the matter through repeated exposure to such situations. In the emergency team scenario, negative features peculiar to those circumstances, such as uncertainty, unfamiliarity and excitement, should ▸▸



E.R. (cont'd)



This is your Captain speaking... We are facing a slight technical problem...The good news is now you can enjoy the pleasure of glider flying...

be almost eliminated. So the question would be whether this can be achieved, and to what extent, with "normal" controllers, those who remain on frequency when, during an otherwise ordinary shift, an emergency situation arises. Or, in other words, whether operational people are placed in the position of offering a high standard of service in critical moments.

Controller training does include emergencies. Some controllers may not have much real-time experience in the field, luckily some would say, though a pilot actually in need might be of a different opinion. They are in any case constantly called on to be professionals and practice the art of overcoming their emotions. All these aspects are given due consideration; where this is not enough, or not adequate in some way, every individual and organisation should re-evaluate their policy and effort. Still, in everyday operational life, one specific item might be given some extra care.

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On a clear Friday night early this year, an almost one-thousand-feet long cruise ship with more than 4,000 people on board struck a reef, a few hours after setting sail from its port of origin on the Tyrrhenian Sea. Around 2200, local time, a lady on board used her mobile to call her daughter at home and report that there was a blackout on the ship, and passengers had been told to put on their life jackets. Her daughter, understandably not being familiar with the alerting procedures for search and rescue, called the Carabinieri (Italian Police), who relayed the information to the Coast Guard. It took a while before the latter succeeded in identifying the relevant ship and its location – not even its name having been initially communicated. When they finally did and called to check what was happening, the first reply was a confirmation of the electrical problem, and no need for assistance.

Shortly afterwards, after admitting the vessel was holed below the waterline and asking for a tugboat, the crew eventually declared a distress situation. In the meantime, and in the following minutes, the ship partially capsized and began to sink a few hundred metres off an island about ten miles from the mainland. On the morning after, you could watch on the news this huge luxury ship lying on its side, partly under water, with a two-hundred-feet long hole on its starboard side, the rock which the ship had struck still embedded in the hull. So far, twenty-five fatalities with seven more unaccounted for, plus some still largely unpredictable environmental consequences, to say nothing of the damage to the reputation and financial situation of the operator of the vessel.

As these lines are being written, it is far too early to draw conclusions about exactly how this came about and how it was at first perceived by the crew, nor would I be in possession of all the elements (and qualifications) to express much more than an educated personal opinion. Nevertheless, what you have just read is there in the official Coast Guard log book and linked to recorded communications, so that it can be considered factual. From the time the lady looked for some domestic comfort, which by the way took place after the collision occurred, to the time the crew acknowledged their emergency status, more than half an hour had passed.

Just one example, not even aeronautical; still, more than one reader might have recalled from personal experience a feeling of being made aware a little too late. In this issue of HindSight, Captain Pooley, in his usual clean and straightforward style, warns controller readers about the probability that pilots will be so prone to delay a MAYDAY call that, when they eventually make it,

ATC will have already developed a feeling of something going wrong.

There is no arguing that declaring an emergency is something that should be done as soon as that is the case, neither before, nor afterwards. What people from the ops room might sometimes ask for is a reasonably earlier involvement whenever rush moments don't spring abruptly, but instead gradually develop from some initial "early warning" signs, or through subsequent steps which evolve from a relatively insignificant anomaly into genuine distress. This already widely applies whenever such anomalies (the classic red light on the cockpit panel) imply unusual behaviour, such as the request to delay take-off after a twenty-minute taxi to "perform some checks". Otherwise, when there are no immediate outward consequences, the flight crew might simply not deem informing ATC to be a fitting action.

Seen from below, perspective changes a bit. Let us focus on the fact that we are not talking here about circumstances that could take place on the ground, such as a power failure in a control centre, or a full loss of surveillance data, which are commonly referred to as contingencies, and for which backups and recovery procedures are also in place; instead, this is about an on-aircraft crisis which the people on board have to cope with on the basis of their procedures, judgment and skill. What we are asked to do is to act on the remaining traffic, in order to avoid additional trouble, and to provide it with all possible assistance, which eventually means getting everything and everyone ready for a possible unfavourable outcome and, before that, passing on useful information to contribute to a happy ending. This information, such as the infamous nearest suitable airport, is something which it is nice, whenever practicable, to have some extra time to look for.

In the case of the shipwreck, some "at first glance" elements may sound unpleasantly familiar: there is a problem, the crew tries to handle it and only when it overwhelms them is information spread outside. Once again, it makes sense, you do not declare an emergency for a mere trifle; in fact, the precise moment when MAYDAY needs to be called is sometimes obvious, sometimes hard to decide. Simply sharing pilots' concerns with those they may later on call for help could sometimes save the day.

This is not an invitation to 'cry wolf', nor to offload responsibilities. Relevant calls should be very explicit about the fact that no special assistance is needed thus far (unless it is), but not unnecessarily specific, merely pointing out that something non-routine is under scrutiny, and that the situation might potentially evolve into a higher degree of complexity. I guess any surveillance controller would highlight that position indication and start considering who is below, what aerodromes are in the vicinity, and so on. In a future which is already here, we will talk much less on frequency, as information will flow on CPDLCs, Mode S downlink parameters and stuff like that; there, you are available for what may become very useful residual voice communications. If those who are asked for assistance are involved at the potential outset of the problem, they will be more aware and ready to assist; today's emergency team member on duty is the same guy who earlier gave an update on QNH, and there is really nothing to complain about.