

THE ROLE OF A MEDICAL ADVISOR

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The objective of utilizing treatment and evacuation protocols is to support wilderness and outdoor program staff, acting as medical care providers in remote areas, in providing high quality medical care. Care providers who operate in this context must make complex and significant medical decisions, often in demanding circumstances with limited or non-existent access to external medical consultation. These wilderness care providers are typically trained in wilderness medicine courses but lack actual patient care experience. Their primary training is as outdoor professionals, not medical professionals. They rely on written protocols to support their medical decision-making. These protocols are frequently developed in conjunction with a Medical Advisor and are customized to address the unique needs of a program. A Medical Advisor may also offer advice on student and staff medical screening, evacuation guidelines, may offer advice during an incident, and offer post-incident review and quality assurance (See Medical Advisor Job Desc.rtf).

Some considerations:

- A Medical Advisor should have a job description. That job description should be shared with the Medical Advisor's malpractice insurance carrier. Ultimately the decision to support the scope of practice in the job description is up to that insurance carrier. It should be clear that the Medical Advisor has a role in the content of the protocols and in the quality assurance program. (See sample job description Medical Advisor Job Desc.rtf)
- A Program which asks staff to practice wilderness medicine skills and/or uses a Medical Advisor should inform their general liability insurance carrier of those actions and responsibilities. They should discuss any potential exclusions in their insurance policy related to providing medical care.
- It would be wise to involve your legal counsel in discussions about your relationship with your Medical Advisor. Your Medical Advisor should also be named in the Release and Indemnity agreement you use with your participants.

Remember, the medical care we provide in the field most commonly falls well within the scope of simple and widely accepted first aid. Having protocols that are supported by a Medical Advisor simply adds one more tool in supporting staff when they need to make difficult medical and evacuation decisions and need to apply a wilderness medicine treatment. The lack of reported case law on these issues speaks to the quality of training and the thoughtfulness of decision-making that occurs in the wilderness setting. We know that well crafted, descriptive protocols serve both staff and participants and facilitate effective decision-making. There are many examples of successful relationships between outdoor programs, Medical Advisors, legal counsel and the appropriate insurance carriers. These programs offer an elevated level of professionalism and care for their staff and participants.