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Lifesavers

Marines rely on quick, high-tech first aid at front lines

Gary Berkheimer and the rest of the Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC) Family of Field Medical Equipment (FFME) team are keeping their eyes on the next military operation. Berkheimer, FFME's subject matter expert, said the group has already taken great strides to improve medical support to the field, but the quest to stay abreast of technology never stops.

The pursuit continues at the team's headquarters in Stafford, Va., part of MCSC's Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Systems programs under the Combat Equipment and Support Systems product group. There, the FFME team develops and fields systems to address the urgent medical needs of the warfighter in the field.

"We're always looking to improve for the next military operation," Berkheimer said. "We spend all year working on new developments and technology improvements so we can sustain our warfighters for the long haul."

Today's medical equipment has come a long way from the sets, kits and outfits used during the first Gulf War.

"We want to take care of Marines as soon as possible to save their lives," Berkheimer said. "Now they can use the First Aid Kit for major injuries and trauma. The gear is simple to use so Marines can apply it in any battle condition or state of mind."

Some of the gear now available or near full development that the FFME team has implemented in the medical system includes Combat Gauze; the Combat Lifesaver Kit; Corpsman Assault Pack; En Route Care System; Monitoring, Oxygen, Ventilation and External Suction device; and the Vaccine and Reagent Refrigeration System.

Scott Adams, Deputy Program Manager, CBRN, is confident the high-tech medical equipment serves the Marines and Sailors well because Navy medical personnel who have used this gear in the field helped to improve it. He pointed specifically to the Corpsman Assault Pack.

“Corpsmen participated in its design in 2005,” he said. “As a result, the pack gives corpsmen speed and flexibility to tailor the equipment to the environment they’re operating in. Corpsmen will breach the same doors and tunnels as their fellow Marines. The new design includes breakout patrol packs that increase mobility while decreasing the weight they carry.”

Advances in modern combat medicine contrast markedly from Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals popularized two decades ago on the television series *M*A*S*H*. The fictional Hawkeye and Trapper John performed surgery removed from the front lines. Today’s Navy surgeons operate in Forward Resuscitative Surgery Systems (FRSS), which is designed to treat 18 trauma cases through surgery. The FRSS is mobile and able to relocate with resupply based on the mission needs of the battle space.

Once surgery is complete and the patient is stabilized at the FRSS the En Route Care System, as Adams explained, is now used to medevac the patients to a higher level of care.

“Reports from Afghanistan said it was hard to keep patients warm,” Berkheimer said. “Now we have an absorbent patient litter system (APLS) with thermal guard. This APLS system can absorb five liters of fluid. The insulating material helps keep patients warm decreasing the negative effects of hypothermia, one of the leading causes of death subsequent to trauma on the battlefield.

“Part of our goal is to standardize equipment across the services,” he added. “Through the Defense Medical Standardization Board and Committee for Combat Casualty Care, the FFME team shares technology and lessons learned with the other services. The team also reaches out to the medical industry to stay in step with the latest developments.”

“Technology in the medical industry is ever-changing,” said Lieutenant Commander Jennifer Smith, FFME Team Leader. “Our mission is to treat, stabilize and transport. We need to ensure our equipment is rugged enough to meet our mission. We are constantly reviewing new products and treatment protocols to keep up with technology and advancements.

“Done right,” Adams added, “our equipment in the field will be similar to that used in a hospital. Our system is invaluable to support that same standard of care in the field. Our modernization effort will make sure we’re ready for the expeditionary environment. All of these efforts from the FFME team have greatly increased our battlefield survival rate during the ‘golden hour.’”



Gary Berkheimer (left) and Senior Chief Hospital Corpsman Mike Langley of the Family of Field Medical Equipment team discuss new medical gear with a visitor at the Modern Day Marine Expo in October 2008. (USMC photo by Bill Johnson-Miles)



Lieutenant Colonel Scott Stebbins (left), Communications Operations Officer with II Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), and Colonel Daniel Lecce, Staff Judge Advocate with II MEF, examine medical supplies in the Individual First Aid Kit during a first-aid class at Camp Lejeune, N.C., in September 2008. (USMC photo by Corporal Meg Varvil)



Members of the Family of Field Medical Equipment team demonstrate the application of H-bandage. *(USMC photo by Jim Katzaman)*

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