

# Big Island hospitals stabilize, transfer trauma victims to Oahu

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STEPHENS MEDIA

**HILO** — Although the Big Island does not have a designated trauma care center, staff at Hilo Medical Center's Emergency Department do their best to treat and stabilize victims of serious injury.

But time can mean the difference between life and death when responding to trauma patients said Dan Brinkman, regional chief nurse executive for the East Hawaii region of Hawaii Health System Corp.

Trauma patients are often flown from the Big Island to Queen's Medical Center in Honolulu — the only designated Level 2 trauma care center in the state. There are no designated Level 1 trauma care centers in Hawaii.

According to the American College of Surgeon's Web site, the designation of a trauma facility is determined by empowered entities, government or otherwise. The college does not designate trauma centers but does verify the presence of specific resources. The college offers a list of designated trauma centers on its Web site, [www.facs.org/trauma/verified.html](http://www.facs.org/trauma/verified.html).

State Rep. Josh Green, D-Notrh Kona, Keauhou, Kailua-Kona, an emergency room doctor who was elected to the Hawaii State House of Representatives in 2004 and serves as its chairman of the House Health Committee, said a trauma center's level is determined by the extent to which the team has credentials in advanced trauma care.

In Green's opinion, neither the state nor the Big Island has adequate trauma care facilities.

"Queen's is excellent, but needs to increase the size of its team by at least 300 percent. The Big Island has good emergency rooms but no formal trauma programs. We need at least one available on-call trauma team at all times," Green said.

Green said the state could be in trouble if faced with a situation that which caused many people to experience trauma injuries.

"If there is a mass casualty event, our severe shortage of trauma providers will let us down. I have proposed the formation of a Hawaii Health Corps to remedy this problem," Green said, referring to his plan to bring in 100 new doctors to under-served areas of the state within the next five years and to establish a "Kamaaina Scholars" program to repay college

loans of nurses who make a commitment to work in Hawaii.

Brinkman said a Level 1 trauma care center is often a research hospital in association with a college or university.

"Most of the Level 1s are academic centers. That is why there are none in Hawaii," Brinkman said, adding a Level 1 trauma facility has all the necessary trauma specialists on-site and ready to spring into action when a trauma patient arrives.

"You've got to have a big base of physicians to do that," he said, adding it is no secret the Big Island is facing a physician shortage and needs many specialty doctors.

Brinkman said a Level 2 trauma center generally has all necessary specialists within a 30-minute radius on-call at all times to respond to trauma patients.

"We want to have the ability to be as close to Level 2 as possible," Brinkman said.

Odetta Rapozo-Pung, nurse manager of the emergency department at Hilo Medical Center, said the hospital has three general surgeons who are excellent with trauma patients.

Still, she said, there is a need for more specialists in East Hawaii to help increase trauma services.

Brinkman said Hilo could use another orthopedic surgeon.

"Most accidents include broken bones of some sort," he said.

Big Island hospitals are taking steps to improve trauma care, Green said.

"I have proposed a \$9 million expansion for Kona's ER, and Hilo is expanding now. I am also fighting to keep our small rural hospitals open across the state, because these facilities often stabilize critically injured patients long enough for them to be flown to advanced care," Green said.

Brinkman said to be a well-equipped trauma center a hospital needs at least the following specialists: a cardiac/thoracic surgeon; an ear, nose and throat surgeon; an orthopedic surgeon; a vascular surgeon; a neurosurgeon; and general surgeons.

Brinkman said Hilo Medical Center has a neurologist but not a neurosurgeon. The hospital has a cardiologist but not a cardiac surgeon. He said there are three general surgeons at the hospital — one ear, nose and throat surgeon, one orthopedic surgeon and one vascular surgeon.

Brinkman said a Level 1 trauma center will often have other specialty

## More info

► Fifty percent of all deaths in Hawaii for people between ages 1 and 44 are caused by trauma-related incidents, based on information collected by the American College of Surgeons in 2005, yet there are no trauma care centers on the Big Island, Maui or Kauai. There is no trauma care center with a Level 1 designation in the state. The only trauma care center with a Level 2 designation is Queen's Medical Center in Honolulu.

► Trauma deaths far surpass deaths from cancer, heart disease and all other causes for this age range in Hawaii. Motor vehicle crashes were reported as the predominant cause of unintentional death.

► Rates of unintentional injury on Neighbor Islands — including the Big Island — were more than double those for Honolulu County across most age categories, based on reports of fatal injuries across the state from 1996 to 2000.

doctors on hand such as an obstretician/gynecologist and a burn specialist.

Steve Morrison, Hilo Medical Center Emergency Department director and emergency room physician, said the hospital does have limitations, but the staff does the best it can.

"We are practicing in a rural setting," Morrison said. "We take whatever comes in the doors."

Morrison said a special trauma unit in the emergency room consists of four rooms where all surgical supplies are set up and ready to go.

Rapozo-Pung said getting trauma patients the necessary care as quickly as possible is a top priority.

"We stabilize and we ship out to Queen's. Burns go to Straub (Clinic & Hospital)," Rapozo-Pung said, adding that currently two helicopter ambulance companies serve East Hawaii, making transfers more timely than ever.

"Hawaii Fire Department also picks up," she said, adding it is possible that a person can be flown to Hilo Medical Center from the accident site and then flown to Honolulu for further trauma care after being stabilized locally.

Green said if a person is injured in a car accident on Saddle Road, response time is an issue.

"A helicopter could be there in 20 minutes, possibly, if there was someone to report the accident and deliver the injured person to Hilo or another facility quickly, but a twin-engine heli-

copter would be a better vehicle to carry the victims rapidly to Queen's," Green said.

Brinkman said "the downside is time. Some stabilization does not buy you enough time. That's the difference between death and saving your life. We pay a cost to live out here."

Hilo Medical Center's Emergency Department is currently undergoing renovations that will increase its capacity and improve technology, said Elena Cabatu, community relations manager for the hospital.

"All the trauma rooms will be updated with the latest, state-of-the-art equipment," Brinkman said. "Trauma is always a huge priority. That service is always intact."

Cabatu said because the hospital's ambulance ramp was relocated during reconstruction, the time it takes to get trauma patients to the hospital has been reduced.

Establishing more trauma care centers in the state could prove challenging, Green said.

"To make Queen's a Level 1 center, we would have to recruit and invest in several new trauma teams. With resources as tight as they are due to poor reimbursements, I do not believe this plan will be achieved without some help from the private sector," Green said. "I believe Maui envisions a Queen's-like trauma service in the near future and I will crusade for one for Big Island as we grow."

Green said while the Big Island's population could easily support a Level 3 trauma center, his immediate focus is getting people to the best care available as quickly as possible.

"Presently, I am interested in getting us more and better helicopters to get people to care immediately," he said. "Hawaii Air Ambulance has invested \$4 million in a twin-engine helicopter which I have high hopes will help get our people quickly to care when tragedy strikes, either to Big Island ERs or Queen's."

While establishing more trauma care facilities is important, Green said there are more immediate problems with health care in Hawaii that need to be addressed right away.

"A commitment to universal primary and preventive health care would do much more for our people's health and is my first goal, but we must have adequate trauma services for times of need," Green said.

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