

## Small But Deadly

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It wasn't the news Jim was hoping for.

Meanwhile, the Sisters crew was hard at work applying a constrictive band to help reduce venous return to the heart. They also started an IV, knowing the Air Life team would need it when the crew arrived with medication to combat the venom.



Left: Following his release from the hospital last year, Jacob Gurney displays the marks that medical personnel used to monitor swelling from the rattlesnake bite. Below: The whole Gurney family at home (left to right) Emma, Jim, Chris, Jonathan, Jacob and Elijah.



Rattlesnake bites can be complicated, and patients can suffer severe allergic reactions, anaphylactic shock, and possible death as a result of the venom injected. Children are especially vulnerable due to their size, and quick access to medical attention is crucial. The faster clinicians can administer the appropriate drugs, the better the patient's odds.

In the past, the antivenin used to treat rattlesnake bites came with its own set of complications. Severe allergic reactions were common, and the serum was expensive and difficult to mix. But recent medical advances have produced a new synthetic version of the old antivenin — a fact that was at the forefront of Flight Nurse Deidre Heinrich's mind when she first heard the dispatch for Air Life.

"As soon as we got the call, I sprinted to the pharmacy and got three vials of Crofab," Deidre explained. "I started doing the calculations for a pediatric patient while the pharmacy mixed it. A big advantage of the Crofab is that there's no need to wait for a test dose, so I knew that would speed things up."

Air Life arrived at Jacob's side in 18 minutes. Chris Gurney was cradling her son in her arms, trying to comfort him in the back of the Sisters ambulance. The sound of the helicopter stirred a new fear in her — a fear that she'd have to let go of her baby and allow the helicopter crew to whisk him away from her.

"When they landed and the nurse came over, she asked, 'are you the mom?'" Chris recalled. "I told her yes, and she said, 'do you want to come?' I was so relieved. She said 'I'm a mom, too, and I'd want to be with my kids.'"

The team quickly loaded Jacob aboard while Chris settled in for the flight. Sensing the young mother's fear, helicopter pilot Joe Moys handed her a "pocket angel" token as a small measure of comfort.

"It gave me something to play with," she said. "The dead snake was in a jar at my feet. I was rubbing Jacob's feet, and they gave me a headset so I could hear them communicating with the hospital."

As Deidre began demarcating Jacob's arm, she explained the process to Chris. Demarcation involves marking the swelling, along with the time of the measurement, in permanent marker on the patient's skin.

"By the time we got to St. Charles, it had already swollen more than a couple inches and was advancing toward his shoulder," Deidre explained. "One concern with a snakebite is that it can become systemic — especially if the venom has been injected into a vessel."

The ER team at St. Charles was ready and waiting when the helicopter landed. Everyone leapt into action, rushing the Jacob into the ER for advanced care.

Meanwhile, Jim was making the drive from Sisters to Bend with a heavy heart.

Having grown up in Alaska, the little he knew about rattlesnakes wasn't good. "I just thought he was dead," he admitted. "I was driving the whole way thinking, 'Lord, he's yours, he always has been.'"

But Jacob pulled through. By that evening, the medication was working and the swelling had started to subside. The Air Life team came in several times to check on their young patient. Pilot Joe Moys took the dead snake out of the jar at Jacob's pleading, letting him see what had inflicted the damage.

"I kept on asking, 'do I get to hold the snake?' and he let me hold it and it was dead but it was still moving," Jacob chirped as his mother grimaced beside him.

"Everyone was so wonderful," Chris added. "Jacob got the best care. I also appreciate that they waited until later to deal with the insurance stuff."

At the time of Jacob's accident, the Gurney family was in the process of changing their insurance plan, and there was some concern at first that they might not be covered. But in a stroke of luck, they learned their new coverage had kicked in that very morning, and the plan included coverage for air ambulance service. Even so, the grateful Gurney family bought an Air Life membership as soon as they got home.

Jacob went home the day after his arrival at St. Charles with no long-term effects from his mishap. "The doctor said it was going to be fine because Air Life got the antivenin in him early," Chris added. "They said if it had taken longer to get him the medication, he might've lost mobility or worse."

But the only side effect the family has noticed is Jacob's renewed fascination for all things that slither. "While we were still in the hospital, he asked if we could go to the pet store and get a snake," Chris said. "He loves snakes — he picks out every snake book at the library and he draws pictures of them at school."

But Jacob understands one important thing now. "Some snakes aren't good snakes," he declared.

## Membership rates increase for first time in 15 years

Since 1991, Air Life has worked to keep membership fees at \$45 a year. But as inflation has crept up and medical costs continue to skyrocket, Air Life recently made the difficult decision to raise the cost of membership to \$50 a year.

"Consumer inflation has been more than two-percent a year, and if we'd followed that trend, we'd have to be charging \$85 year," explained Wanda Grindstaff, Air Life's membership coordinator. "We know that's not affordable for our members, but we also know we have to do something to keep pace with our own rising costs."

The new membership rate is effective May 1. For ground/air combination

memberships, rates will increase from \$80 to \$90 a year.

"We hope our members will continue to see the value in membership," Wanda added. "As always, when one of our members is flown by Air Life or one of our reciprocal partners, we'll bill the member's insurance and then write off any flight costs not covered by the insurance. The same coverage applies for our ground members who are transported by one of our FireMed affiliated partners."

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