

# HEALTH

**HEALTH DRIVE** JEAN-PAUL AUBIN-PARVU TAKES TO THE STREETS OF MARYLEBONE WITH THE DRIVERS AND COURIERS OF MEDICAL SERVICES





This is no ordinary call centre. No one is being abused by an irate caller, nor is anybody trying to sell someone a new type of insurance they'll never actually need. This is the headquarters of Medical Services, which provides a range of round the clock services to the NHS and private healthcare community across England and Wales, including emergency delivery of human organs, tissues, blood and nuclear medicine to hospitals, laboratories and clinics. The company also provides specialist transport to and from hospital for walking, wheelchair, stretcher and high dependency patients. It even has something for the fuller figured – purpose built bariatric vehicles that can accommodate patients weighing up to 47 stone.

“We are the single largest provider to all the private hospitals in Marylebone,” says Joe Sheehan, director of Medical Services. His company serves the HCA hospital group, which in Marylebone comprises The Harley Street Clinic, The Princess Grace Hospital, The Portland Hospital and 30 Devonshire Street.

Medical Services has its roots in Marylebone. Back in the 1980s it was known as the Harley Street Runners, a small private courier company supplying foot messengers, cycle and motorcycle couriers to the local private health community. “We still have one foot messenger who walks up and down Harley Street delivering from surgery to surgery for the princely sum of a pound,” says Joe.

This morning the London HQ is manned by controllers in direct radio communication with the medical couriers and patient transport crews. Others speak to patients, arranging their collection and drop off to hospitals, surgeries and clinics all over the capital. Every vehicle in the fleet is satellite tracked, linking into a

secure booking and control system.

This year Medical Services will move one million patients for the NHS. “We are the only private provider allowed onto the NHS N3 network,” explains Joe. N3 is a secure network and all the staff in the control room must be checked by the Criminal Records Bureau. “Having access to patient information is a confidential issue. It's taken extremely seriously.”

I spy a red phone over in the corner of the room. It reminds me of the Batphone. It's actually the direct emergency line for organ transplants. “When a donor comes up we'll get a call from a coordinator saying that we need to get a surgical team to a site, for example, a road traffic accident,” says Joe. “First we take the coordinator out in a blue light vehicle and then we'll arrive with the surgical team. We get them back to the hospital where they perform the transplant. There are specialist teams trained to work under blue lights – they are on call 24 hours a day and are specifically targeted for those missions.”

The other red phone is in case of a major incident in London. The company has been called to two such emergencies in recent months including the fire at Northwick Park Hospital. “We are a second tier responder,” says Joe. “If another 7/7 happens we'll get a phone call and someone from the ministry will come in and take over. Normal operations will stop and they'll send our vehicles out to provide back up to the emergency services. We're all Londoners and if anything happens we're happy to help.”

I am now taken over to Harley Street by car to meet some of Medical Services' operatives. The first is motorcycle courier Sandrigo Rosso Coelho. Sandrigo delivers everything from diagnostic samples, blood

samples and blood for transfusions through to paperwork and x-rays – picking up and dropping off to surgeries, hospitals and laboratories. Sandrigo's has been trained in the safe transportation of blood products and diagnostic specimens and his mission is to deliver everything on time and in perfect condition – and to the correct destination.

The not so pale rider has lived in England for five and a half years. “I was born in Brazil but used to live in Italy, near Rome,” he says after extricating his head from its helmet. “But the issue I've got with Italy is the hot weather in the summer. I can't stand it, so that is why I chose to live in England.”

As we shiver in the August sunshine I discover that Sandrigo has been a motorcycle courier with Medical Services for four years. “Before that I spent six months as a normal courier. I used to work with computers, IT systems, office things mainly, but when I became a courier I discovered the freedom of the road.”

I suggest that he must spend much of his time cutting up buses and riding up onto pavements to beat the London gridlock. Apparently not. “It's about safety,” he assures me. “If you take huge risks on the road your package might not get there. You don't need to ride like an idiot. You just need a good knowledge of the area and to think about which way you're going to go before you set off – that will save you much more time.”

So how do the Marylebone highways compare to the streets of Rome? “I've driven a motorbike in Rome,” says Sandrigo, shuddering at the memory. “You never know when someone is going to pull out in front of you. It's complete madness.”

During his time with Medical Services Sandrigo has experienced nothing more major than the odd

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puncture, thanks to the company spending a small fortune each year on vehicle maintenance. This is vital, as a surgeon may be waiting in an operating theatre for a delivery to arrive – a life may literally depend on it. Worth remembering the next time you're debating whether or not to let a motorcycle courier pass.

As Sandrigo kickstarts his motorbike and rides off into the afternoon I'm introduced to Claudette Little and Rovertos Charampdidis, the two halves of a patient transport crew. I ask Claudette how their role differs from that of their NHS peers. "Someone in the NHS would probably be a bit more hands on with things that happen in the street," she says. "They'd see more accidents and things like that, whereas our job is more controlled where you get an appointment time to bring a patient to a specific destination. However, if we see an accident or are flagged down then we'd obviously stop and assist and call the 999 services."

The patient transport crews take patients to and from hospitals,

surgeries and clinics, with the most seriously ill patients taken in blue light high dependency ambulances equipped to NHS standards.

"Patient care is imperative," stresses Claudette. "Some of these patients are in nursing homes and don't get to see people on a regular basis, so a bit of tender loving care works wonders with them. If they get to see a crew mate regularly they'll form a relationship with that person and feel much more confident."

That confidence is especially vital when you're being carried down a particularly tricky, almost vertical set of stairs. "My crew mate literally had to sit on his bum and come down one stair at a time while I was at the front," remembers Claudette. "Your priority is to bring that patient down safely – they are relying on you. You have to reassure them and talk them through it, and talk to your crew mate, because it's a team effort to move a patient safely. And you also have to be physically fit."

Rovertos is driving today. Some patients may have spinal problems or bed sores, for example, and may need to sit in a certain position, which he must take into account every time he turns a corner or approaches a speed bump. And if the patient is wheelchair bound and can't be transferred to a seat then the chair must be strapped in securely. Otherwise just one heavy touch of the brakes and you've got a patient in a wheelchair hurtling along the Marylebone Road.

Though today they are using a standard vehicle, Rovertos is a qualified blue light ambulance

## LINKS

### Medical Services

The Lewis Day Building  
76 East Road, Old Street  
020 7014 1050  
[medicalservicesuk.com](http://medicalservicesuk.com)

driver. "It's more difficult when you drive on a blue light," he says. "You need to concentrate much more. It looks easy but it's not."

Surely breaking red lights is an adrenaline rush. "It is a good feeling because it's something you wouldn't normally do, but you still have to always have safety in mind," stresses Claudette. "So the approach is still the same. You slow down and check both ways, because at the end of the day you've got a patient in the back."

I tell Claudette and Rovertos that when my mum trained to be a radiographer back in the 1960s, the ambulance drivers used to be sent out for fish and chips. Apparently it was only by using their blue lights and sirens and breaking endless red lights that the drivers could ensure that the food arrived at the hospital still warm.

Claudette and Rovertos stare at me like I'm mad. "We can't use our blue lights to go to the chip shop," Rovertos informs me. "We need permission from head office to switch them on."

So they don't deliver fish and chips, but has either of them delivered a baby? "I came close once," answers Claudette. "I was crossing the North Circular and saw this lady with her three children over on the pathway. She was bent over holding her stomach and was about to have a baby. They'd been chased by a dog and had run across the North Circular – you can imagine how busy it was. So I got her on board and did her breathing with her and then we got her off to the hospital – and that was that."

Both Claudette and Rovertos love the job. "I can safely say, after being on this planet for 43 years, that this is the first job which gives me job satisfaction," says Claudette. "I get to drive which is something I love doing. I get to meet people and help them by getting them from A to B and making their life a bit more comfortable. That's what I get out of the job."

"Yes me too," pipes up Rovertos. "I just like to help people."