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Fear triggers emergency response to passenger's illness

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BALTIMORE (AP) - Southwest Flight 1283 from Houston had a problem. Toward the end of Thursday night's flight, a woman at the back of the plane began what officials describe as projectile-vomiting, triggering "a chain reaction" among other passengers. At about the same time, another woman began having chest pains.

The pilot radioed for an in-flight emergency physician. By the time the flight landed at Baltimore-Washington International Airport at 10:26 p.m., ambulance crews from nearby counties, BWI's fire and rescue service, a hazmat team and medical personnel were waiting.

The woman who first vomited turned out to have a routine stomach virus. The woman with chest pains was OK. Both were treated and released at a local hospital.

And although initial reports said as many as seven other passengers got sick out of sympathy, in reality there were only three and all declined medical treatment.

Some experts said Friday that officials overreacted, afraid they might be ignoring an act of terrorism or deadly disease outbreak.

"Clearly, the response was not appropriate for what the outcome was," said Dr. Colin Mackenzie, director of the National Study Center for Trauma and EMS, which studies disaster management. "The question is, 'How do you avoid such a response in the future?'"

Baltimore Health Commissioner Peter Beilenson said coughing, nausea and vomiting on planes is common and almost never linked to a deadly contagious disease or bioterrorism. He said the emergency response "sounds like overkill."

"It's a cliché but true: the terrorists win if every time someone throws up on a plane ... ambulances meet the plane on the tarmac," Beilenson said.

Homeland security expert Michael Greenberger said similar responses will likely become standard as officials enact plans they've put in place to combat the spread of contagious diseases, such as SARS, and possible bioterrorism attacks.

"When you start seeing a sickness spreading through the cabin, especially in this day and age and with the SARS epidemic still hanging around, you're going to get this type of response," said Greenberger, director of the University of Maryland Center for Health and Homeland Security.

Officials haven't yet figured out everything that happened on the plane after the vomiting began. BWI spokeswoman Tracy Newman said "some of the early reports were a little exaggerated. When you have an emergency on a plane, it's not difficult to imagine the concern. People get scared."

Mackenzie said people who are near a sick person -- especially in a close environment, such as a plane or subway -- often panic, thinking that they too are getting sick.

He mentioned the sarin nerve gas attacks in the Tokyo subway system, where people flocked to hospitals complaining of symptoms they didn't actually have.

"They somehow feel the events relate to them when they don't," Mackenzie said.

A Southwest spokeswoman said she didn't know all the details either -- other than a flight attendant reported some passengers were sick to the pilot, who then contacted a 24-hour emergency service that put him in touch with a physician.

The airline had no reports that anyone had a contagious disease or was involved in bioterrorism, said spokeswoman Whitney Eichinger.

Newman said emergency workers responded appropriately. The plane was kept 50 feet from the terminal, and hazmat teams examined it while the 114 passengers were kept onboard.

After about half an hour, when the teams found no abnormalities, passengers were taken to a holding area and questioned to determine if anything on the plane had caused the sickness. They were then allowed to leave. Officials took air samples from the plane, but found no contaminants.

Assistant Maryland Transportation Secretary James Ports Jr. called the incident "a tremendous opportunity to exercise our emergency response."

Mackenzie, who is a professor at the University of Maryland Medical School, said one -- albeit expensive -- way to stop future unnecessary exercises would be airport sensors that detect people's illnesses.

Beilenson offered another solution: common sense. "You just cannot overreact," he said. "The bad guys want to do something bad to us. But making four people nauseous on an airplane is not the way they're going to do it."