

Blog

Music and Medicine: Providing Medical Care at Coachella

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By Jodi McCaffrey

Nestled at the base of several mountain ranges near posh Palm Springs, Calif., the Coachella Valley has become home to several music festivals known more for their bohemian concert-goers than their Bentleys. These outdoor events are another way that EmCare-affiliated clinicians are providing care in the community.



For many 20- and 30-somethings, the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival is a rite of passage. The festival takes place over two weekends in April, with most attendees opting to camp on the festival grounds during the event. But what happens when crowd surfing to The Chainsmokers or Calvin Harris ends in a wipeout?

Concert-goers are in good hands during Coachella, Desert Trip, its more mature uncle, and Stage Coach, their country cousin. Through a contract with event producer Golden Voice, clinicians from AMR and EmCare provide clinical care in the field.

EmCare physician Mark Reynolds, MD, has provided medical care at Coachella for the last three years. With prior experience as an EMT and US Air Force Emergency Physician, Dr. Reynolds said his varied training is well-suited to the types of injuries and ailments seen at the annual event, which attracts nearly 100,000 attendees per weekend and more than 100 musical acts.

"We typically see patients with syncope, dehydration, intoxication, substance abuse and heat-related ailments," explained Dr. Reynolds, who is an emergency physician at Los Alamitos and Lakewood Regional medical centers. "We also treat a lot of patients with respiratory issues from the wind and dust in the desert."

The event is supported with two 30-bed "MASH"-style air-conditioned mobile tent units staffed by nurses, advanced practice providers and physicians, including Brian Wilbur, MD; Jesse Borke, MD; and Denis Stizza, MD, FACEP, and Brit Ferrell, MD, MBA, FACEP, executive vice presidents with EmCare.

"These folks are out in the desert sun with little sleep and a lot of alcohol, and with some drugs mixed in," explained Dr. Ferrell, who worked at Coachella for the first time last spring. "It's important to have adequate medical services onsite at an event of this size."

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He said EMTs and paramedics from AMR patrol the grounds on golf carts to ensure those who need medical attention receive it. Patients are given IV fluids, nebulizer treatments and other interventions at the mobile ER. They can rest on cots until they are stable enough to either leave the venue or return to the party. The team can administer tests like EKGs, and those who need more acute care can be transported to a local hospital.

Drs. Reynolds and Ferrell also provided their clinical expertise at Desert Trip, a festival held in the same valley in October. Nicknamed “Oldchella,” the two-weekend festival featured The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan and The Who, among others. Desert Trip resulted in much of the same types of dehydration and intoxication cases, with the added factor of the age of most of the attendees.

“At Coachella, the average age was 22. At Desert Trip, the average age was 52,” explained Dr. Ferrell. “While we didn’t see as many drug issues at Desert Trip, we did see a lot more complaints of chest pain and cardiac issues.” He said between 30 to 40 attendees had to be transported to area hospitals for further treatment.

“While it’s still work and still a long day, working Coachella was an amazing experience,” said Dr. Ferrell. “Just the massive scale of the event, the amount of staff, the logistics that go into it ... it’s a shift unlike anything else.”

Physicians, who work 12-hour shifts at the events, are paid an hourly fee. They also receive a general admission concert pass (a \$400 value) for the weekend that they aren’t working.

“Staffing these events represents a great partnership between two Envision Healthcare companies and provides a unique practice environment for our clinicians in Southern California,” said Dr. Ferrell.

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