VITALS
A Weekly Safety Newsletter For Medical Transport Professionals

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Safety isn't Rocket Science. Or is it?

Wernher von Braun was a Nazi rocket scientist. He was such a brilliant man that when he was in his mid-twenties he became the leader of the Nazi rocket program, which developed "buzz bombs" that would eventually fall on London. This work began years in advance of World War II.

When von Braun started the program they were lucky to get a rocket that would work well enough to leave the launch pads. There were many trials and experiments with different sorts of fuels, fins and configurations. Each attempt took weeks or months of preparation, and any failure would put the program on hold, because until the root cause analysis was completed, it wasn't safe to launch. There were some primitive monitoring capabilities, but the information that was provided was difficult to interpret.

Finally, after several years, von Braun was successful in not only getting rockets to launch, he could aim them. That's when Hitler, Himmler and Speer got really interested. Hitler was fanatic about getting "super weapons" and was terribly impatient to get them. You don't need to be much of a history buff to know that if Hitler was watching you it probably wasn't a good idea to be anything but successful.

Hitler came to Peenemunde to watch a launch. The rocket went "disastrously astray". He accused von Braun of intentionally hindering the war effort. Hitler had to be dissuaded from arresting von Braun. After the literal and figurative smoke cleared the entire team was terribly frightened. How could they figure out what happened and quickly fix it?

As the team reconstructed the event, an engineer found that he had made a mistake in a calculation that resulted in a design flaw. It was obvious that his error was the root cause of the problem. The engineer immediately went to von Braun and described the error in great detail. How would you respond if somebody came to you and told you that he made a mistake that could have gotten you executed?

Von Braun gave the engineer a bottle of champagne and praised him in front of the entire staff. He realized that with humans there are always going to be errors. This gave him the opportunity to put processes into place that would help him discover risks and eliminate or mitigate them.

After the War, von Braun came to America and was instrumental in developing our space program. His work made the space shuttle program possible. In fact a NASA administrator in the early 1970s told von Braun; "We were not at all pleased by your warning words, but finally we accepted your advice.....If you had not raised the red flag at that time, I'm certain the entire shuttle project would be dead by now."

Safety might not require rocket science, but even rocket science requires safety.