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Our Opinion: A bipartisan effort helps first responders save patients' lives

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Firefighters and paramedics work to free a victim trapped in an SUV after a two-vehicle crash at the intersection of U.S. 301 and the U.S. 264 East on-ramp in early 2016. TIMES FILE PHOTO

Posted Tuesday, November 7, 2017 11:30 pm

A Times editorial

Bipartisanship may be on life support in Washington these days, but two North Carolina congressmen were able to revive it in the ambulance.

Rep. G.K. Butterfield, a Wilson Democrat, and Rep. Richard Hudson, a Concord Republican, are heralding the passage of House Bill 304, the Protecting Patient Access to Emergency Medications Act.

H.R. 304 will enhance emergency medical technicians' ability to dispense lifesaving drugs, cutting through a tangle of federal red tape that brings unnecessary complication into the life-and-death decisions paramedics and EMTs must make in a matter of moments.

Once President Donald Trump signs the bill into law, H.R. 304 will allow the Drug Enforcement Administration to authorize EMS agencies to dispense controlled substances. Federal law currently requires agencies' medical directors and individual practitioners alike to meet registration requirements.

"Without this solution, quality emergency care and patients would have been endangered simply because law and regulation have not kept up with the evolution of modern medicine," explained Brent Myers, president of the National Association of EMS Physicians. "This is an important clarification of law that allows our first responders to continue administering lifesaving medications to patients when they need them most."

H.R. 304 states that emergency medical technicians employed by a registered EMS agency can administer medication under a standing order issued by a medical director. The order would not have to be specific to an individual patient.

The American College of Emergency Physicians and the International Association of Fire Fighters have both endorsed the bill. It's the kind of common-sense legislation that anyone with basic knowledge of emergency first responders' job and the challenges they face would support.

Congress did not disappoint — the bill passed 404-0 in January and cleared the Senate by unanimous consent Oct. 24. Senators tacked on an amendment and final approval by both chambers was secured Friday.

While improving emergency medicine wasn't controversial, neither was this patient-centered reform a sure thing. A previous version of the bill passed the House in 2016 but did not receive a Senate floor vote.

Hudson and Butterfield reintroduced the bill in January after the 115th Congress convened. Hudson, who represents North Carolina's 8th Congressional District, is the legislation's primary sponsor.

H.R. 304 has 25 cosponsors — 13 Democrats and 12 Republicans. Counting Hudson, that makes the bill as bipartisan as it gets, with equal representation from both parties.

"Through this bill, we hope to ensure patients receive treatment when they need it most, particularly in rural communities like those in eastern North Carolina where the patient may be far removed from an emergency room," said Butterfield, who represents the 1st Congressional District. "I commend my colleagues for coming together to pass this potentially lifesaving measure so that patients can receive treatment as quickly as possible."

The North Carolina congressmen were effusive in their mutual praise. It was a virtual lovefest on their official Facebook pages, where Hudson and Butterfield tagged each other to share identical congratulatory messages.

"I want to thank Congressman G. K. Butterfield for being a reliable partner in this effort," Hudson wrote. "This is an example of how to get things done — finding common ground and advancing bipartisan solutions to get results people deserve."

Thunderous applause for the kind of technical correction that should sail through Congress on autopilot is evidence both that dysfunction on Capitol Hill is rampant and that there are thoughtful, hardworking lawmakers on both sides of the aisle working mightily to fix what's broken.

Cynics would call H.R. 304 a gimme, akin to shooting fish in a barrel, but only a year ago this important and uncontroversial bill died on the Senate's table. Its sponsors have earned the right to celebrate, and we'll cheer along with them.

Thanks to Hudson, Butterfield and two-dozen cosponsors from both sides of the aisle, medics won't have to hesitate when seconds count and life hangs in the balance.

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