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LEGISLATIVE ACTION ALERT

UPS DRONES ARE NOW MOVING BLOOD SAMPLES OVER NORTH CAROLINA

WIRED

ERIC ADAMS WIRED© APRIL 4, 2019

IF YOU'RE INCLINED to puns, you might say medical samples are the lifeblood of hospital systems. But if you actually work with them, you know they're more of a headache. Because the same road traffic that keeps you from getting home keeps the couriers charged with moving these tissue and blood samples, collected by the millions daily and often in urgent need of analysis, from completing their missions.

So it makes a lot of sense that when the FAA decided to sanction the first revenue-generating drone delivery scheme in the US, it went with one that promises to speed up that process, run by UPS and autonomous drone technology firm Matternet. It makes sense from the tech perspective too: The cargo is extremely lightweight and compact, allowing the companies involved to focus on the delivery processes and mechanisms rather than trying to manage unwieldy payloads.

The service ran its first flight Tuesday, at North Carolina-based WakeMed's hospital in Raleigh, using Matternet's compact M2 quadcopter. The drone, which measures about 2 feet square, can carry payloads of about 5 pounds for 12.5 miles on each battery charge. It can complete a flight in about three minutes, versus the 30 or so it takes human drivers to make it in average daily traffic. Even though the drone operates autonomously, a

remote pilot-in-command monitors each flight and can intervene if necessary. The drones, operating from specially designated pads at each location, will conduct about 10 daily flights to start, with more possible if the service takes off. Samples are loaded onto a secure and locked compartment underneath the quadcopter.

This effort is born of the FAA's Unmanned Aircraft System Integration Pilot Program, a three-year project set up to test the safe integration of drone technologies into commercial airspace. Testing for WakeMed's service began last August, with additional oversight from the North Carolina Department of Transportation. UPS, which already has a health care division that specializes in medical deliveries, sees multiple potential benefits: not just moving those vital samples more efficiently but taking vehicles off the road. Matternet has some experience with this already: It has executed more than 3,000 similar flights in Switzerland.

For WakeMed, the service should lower costs and speed up deliveries, improving patient services. Matternet says the technology-development benefit as well as the predictability and reliability of the service. Both UPS and Matternet hope to expand the services quickly to other locations around the country.