

A LETTER FROM

ANTARCTICA

“Where humankind goes, medicine must follow” – World Extreme Medicine

– Written by Celeste Geertsema, Liesel Geertsema, and Peter Dzendrowskyj



Humans love to explore. It's in our DNA. From the first great migration out of the plains of Africa, into the cold mountains of Europe and Asia 50 000 years ago, until our most recent endeavours to settle New Zealand (barely 750 years ago), we have been driven to investigate and conquer every corner of our planet. Except for one: Antarctica.

Sure, the great explorers have been there. Amundsen, Scott, Shackleton – just mentioning the names conjures up vivid images of great feats of hardship, bravery, endurance and, of course, survival. But not conquest. Antarctica does not belong to anyone - and it is just as well. Antarctica is still one of the loneliest places on earth and therefore, we would argue, one of the most pristine and beautiful.

That remoteness is part of its appeal. Going to Antarctica still feels like going on an expedition. It is no joke - it requires planning, preparation, hard work, and involves a certain degree of risk.

In October 2023, we had the unique opportunity to fulfil a life-long dream: to ski tour the Antarctic peninsula. Our guide on the trip was Mark Sedon, a good kiwi friend, and colleague, we had worked with 25 years ago on ski patrol on Mt. Ruapehu - a New Zealand volcano. Mark has many accomplishments - he summited Mt. Everest (and all the 'Seven Summits'), ski-toured in Pakistan and sailed the Southern Ocean. Most importantly, he completed a kite-skiing expedition across Antarctica which also involved climbing one of the most remote peaks on earth – Mt. Spectre - close to the South Pole. We wanted to experience Antarctica in its raw beauty, and this was a safe way of doing it. It was not a 'tourist' trip. We had to be prepared, fit, able to acclimatise and adapt to the natural conditions – but Mark, as our guide, absolved us from having to have years of experience surviving in these conditions.

It was a life-changing experience. Nothing prepares you for the sensation of insignificance you experience when faced with a towering iceberg the size of a skyscraper, or an avalanche set off simply by stepping on shore, or a landscape where the dots of human skiers disappear in a sea of frozen snow waves. The isolation is palpable, with the overwhelming sound of absolute silence when you all stop and just listen for a moment. No traffic. No planes. No people. No 'white noise'. Just silence. And no internet! Then there is also the endless expanse of a thousand different shades of white – in the snow under your feet, in the water around you, in the sky above your head. This was Antarctica at its best – the end of the World, and truly off the beaten track.

Here is a fun fact: more people have apparently climbed mount Everest than skied Antarctica.

It was hard work, skinning up the mountain for several hours a day, for the pleasure of skiing down in what seemed like an instant. But every downhill moment was worth more than 10 times



its uphill equivalent. That is the essence of ski-touring!

We were lucky. Antarctica can be unforgiving. The history books will attest to it, and the quotes act as stark reminders. Sir Raymond Priestly once said:

“For scientific discovery, give me Scott; for speed and efficiency of travel, give me Amundsen; but when disaster strikes and all hope is gone, get down on your knees and pray for Shackleton”.

We are pleased to say we had no need for Shackleton. However, we did have to cut our journey short by several days due to a huge storm brewing in the Drake Passage (the notorious stretch of water between South America and Antarctica). We managed to sneak past the storm (just) and got to Ushuaia in time to tentatively book our return trip in 12 months’ time.

Why are we writing about Antarctica in this journal?

There are several reasons: Firstly, it is a

beautiful, awe-inspiring, humbling place and the Journal gives us the platform to share this. Secondly, it seems to us that those who are lucky enough to be given the opportunity to explore it, have a responsibility to highlight the fragility of this unique and vulnerable place, and to urge people to do everything they can to preserve it. Thirdly (and most importantly) this is a sports medicine journal, and this was one of our first steps on a journey to explore a new frontier in medicine: Extreme Medicine.



Mark Hannaford is an adventurer with years of experience running trips in many different continents. After inviting medics to join his expeditions he realised that even though they were well accomplished in medicine, many of them lacked the practical skills to work effectively in these environments. So, he founded World Extreme Medicine, an organisation that teaches medics (doctors, nurses, paramedics, dentists, and other allied medical staff) how to practice their craft in environments as varied as mountains, the polar regions, deserts, jungles, oceans and even underwater on SCUBA diving trips. They also prepare medics for working in war zones and humanitarian projects. World Extreme Medicine, in conjunction with the University of Exeter in the UK, offered the World's first Masters degree in Extreme Medicine. It is a distance learning MSc, with practical courses lasting 1-2 weeks in remote environments. This is a growing field of medicine, and more and more universities are now offering similar courses – check out University of South Wales, Glasgow Caledonian University, University of Tasmania, University of Central Lancashire, Northeastern University in the USA and many others. All of these offer a combination of distance learning and residential courses in extreme environments.

Experiencing the remoteness of Antarctica and its' challenges has convinced us that further training in Extreme Medicine could be a natural progression in a sports medicine career. It is essentially sports medicine for the 'extreme' athlete - those who participate in extreme environments.

Have you ever considered this? It is a wonderful combination of medicine and the skills to not only survive, but indeed thrive, in extreme environments. Pursuing a career in Extreme Medicine will not only challenge your medical abilities, it will also allow you to fulfil that primeval urge to continuously push your boundaries into new frontiers. Just like our ancestors and the great explorers...



Images: All images in this article are from the authors' private collection.

Celeste Geertsema M.D.

Liesel Geertsema M.D.

Peter Dzendrowskyj M.D.

*Aspetar Orthopaedic & Sports Medicine
Hospital
Doha, Qatar*

Contact: celeste.geertsema@aspetar.com