

Valley welcomes new director of emergency services
Dr. Johnson talks risk assessment, the outdoors and the future of the valley's healthcare

By Emily A. Palm

For the last 15 years, Teton Valley has been Dr. Eric Johnson's home base. Even when he spent several months in Nepal, he had his Teton County absentee ballot mailed to him and his wife, Michelle. Teton Valley Hospital's new director of emergency services has been around the world. Name an outdoor pursuit and he's most likely got some kind of certification for it, if he's not the president of its society.

Johnson, an adrenaline junky who listens to Enya and Dido, has spent the last 17 years working in Boise and playing in Driggs. In June he moved to the valley full time. Growing up in Minnesota, Johnson's family used to come to the Tetons to camp for vacations. One summer he asked to take a course through the Exum School of Mountaineering, and when the 16-year-old climbed the Grand he was hooked.

"I just became a fanatic," he said on climbing. Going home to the land of lakes, he satiated his ascending needs by climbing the rock quarries. He headed to Helena, Mont. for undergraduate and graduate school and spent most of his time in Glacier or Yellowstone National Parks. That's where he met his wife, Michelle, who is from Alberton, Mont. They were married a few years later.

Johnson started out with a different vision of where his career would take him. "I was never going to be doctor," he said. After earning a master's degree in environmental health, he had plans to demonstrate the importance the environment has on people with a job lined up in Geneva, Switzerland with the World Health Organization. "If human health is affected by the environment maybe people will listen," he said. Last minute he changed his European plans and applied (and was accepted) for early admission to Minnesota's medical school. He informed his wife of the change from the Alps to the American Midwest (gentlemen, not a recommended move) and they headed to Minneapolis instead of Geneva.

His plan was to focus his career on how environmental degradation affects human health. "I fell in love with patient care," he said, "The rest, shall we say, is history." After a brief stint of working at Mt. McKinley in Alaska for school and some time in John Day, Ore. he headed to Boise.

For the past 17 years Driggs has been Johnson's playground; a place to ski, climb and fish. He always said it is nice to live where you don't work. As a man who plays hard and works hard, he prefers to clearly separate the two. After owning a home here since 1992, voting here and playing here, the chief executive of the hospital, Susan Kunz, called Johnson and asked him if he take charge of the emergency department. "Now it is time to contribute," he said of accepting the job in the place he has enjoyed for so long. He'd been on the hospital's radar from knowing EMS folks in the valley; he also speaks at local conferences.

Since starting at the hospital on June 1 Johnson has already seen a plethora of emergencies. The health needs of the population here are split, Johnson said, into the younger set who thrashes themselves daily (on their mountain bikes or at the bar) and the elder set with more acute chronic ailments.

While Johnson's world of work and play have blurred in where he lives, he plans to still enjoy his free time in the community. "I tell people I don't walk on water," he quipped, noting when he is on, he is on. With such a high burnout rate in emergency doctors, Johnson attributed his longevity to his ability to cut loose and balance his professional life with personal. "It's fairly taxing," he said of emergency room work. His wife (and best friend), Michelle, is his barometer, he said, noting she will encourage him to rejuvenate.

Volunteering as a Base Camp doctor at the foot of Mt. Everest in Nepal recharges Johnson (*see related story B1*). "I come home ready to tackle the world again," he said, noting he plans to go again next March. His role as president of the Wilderness Medical Society (WMS) is a great example of how he combines his passion with his profession. He works with Dr. Luanne Freer at the Base Camp clinic that Freer, former president of the WMS, started up in 2003. Both Johnson and Freer were in a BBC documentary about the clinic, called "Everest ER" which plays on the Discovery Channel on a regular basis. They were also written about in the July 2007 issue of Outside Magazine.

Before he heads to Base Camp next spring, Johnson's travel docket abounds beginning with a trip to Snowmass, Colo. next week for a WMS conference. In September he heads to New York to teach at Cornell University, October will take him to Scotland for the International Society of Mountain Medicine, and in November he heads from the hills to the Cayman Islands for medical sailing, Park City, Utah in February, Portland, Ore. in March and then to Nepal.

Along with being president of the Wilderness Medical Society and on the board of directors for the Himalayan Rescue Society, he is a dive instructor, pilot of small airplanes, sailor, sea kayaker and climber. As a doctor in the ER, does he ever think twice about pulling a tricky climbing move or diving deep depths? "You want to talk about odds, don't drive," he replied. He noted far more people die on the road than on belay, from bee stings than snakebites, and moose maulings than bear attacks. Certain things get more publicity and are therefore more feared when looking at the data, general life is far riskier.

Johnson is still involved with Boise boards, but he wants to focus more on Teton Valley's healthcare system. "I'm slowly but surely eliminating obligations," he said, noting he plans to stay. "This is a very cool place to live," he said, "If you don't appreciate it then you need to travel around the world." As more and more people move to the valley, new programs are on the way. "Your system is going to change," Johnson said definitively. After working in the Boise system for 17 years, he has been through the growth and change of a healthcare system.

Now that Teton Valley Hospital is bringing 24-7 coverage for 365 days of the year, he sees the need for the recent hiring such as the chief of Orthopaedics Dr. Mo Brown, particularly considering some of the large subdivisions on the way. “All of which are going to need healthcare,” Johnson noted. While he enjoys patient care, he is very excited to help develop the system. “They could truly have amazingly great health care right at the local hospital,” he said of valley residents, noting the importance of supporting the local hospital. He noted they would like to see where people go for what reasons, whether residents head to Rexburg or Jackson because of reputation or availability of services. Johnson noted the hospital is very unique since they do not have a tax district. Thus it lives 100 percent on revenue, which is, “very amazing for a critical access hospital,” Johnson said.

More information can be found at, www.tvhcare.org, about the hospital and <http://www.wms.org/about/board.asp> about the Wilderness Medical Society.