

BENJAMIN LISCHNER MD

Following the Wilderness and Mountain Medicine conference in Aviemore, Scotland in October, 2007, I immediately applied to the WMS fellowship program. Our conditions in Northern Scandinavia are a perfect marriage with the Wilderness Medicine Society. As intern director for Sweden's northernmost hospital in Kiruna, I can certify that we expose and train our junior physicians to work independently, under extreme conditions, with meager resources. In other words we practice wilderness medicine on a daily basis. With a population of 24000 spread out over an arctic landscape of 20000 square kilometers, our medical staff must be acquainted with wilderness medicine and pre-hospital care under duress and extreme conditions. Our intern training program rigorously trains intern physicians in arctic medicine with a number of obligatory courses.

Tourism is a huge staple our local economy. The Ice Hotel in Jukkasjärvi (10 min from Kiruna) is one of Sweden's most internationally recognized tourist destinations. Riksgränsen ski resort is an eldorado for powder skiers. Heli-skiing and top touring are popular sports.

While our population is small and remote, Kiruna is host to many internationally known businesses. Our climate varies between 20-25C in the summer to -40C in the winter. Our atmospheric extremes and natural resources have given rise to a number of modern industries. LKAB mining, Ice Hotel, Esrange-Swedish Space Corporation, and the Institute for Space Physics are well-known international businesses active in Kiruna. Esrange frequently works with NASA. Most exciting is the prospect that Richard Branson will bring "Virgin Galactic" to Kiruna and execute approximately 300 private manned space flights per year. Thanks to the newfound iron ore deposits at the LKAB mine the economy of Kiruna is expanding and is now Sweden's third most expanding economies.

Kiruna Hospital is a member of Norrbotten County Council, the government agency charged with administering health care in Northern Sweden. The health care system in Norrbotten is divided into five hospitals and twenty-nine primary care facilities. In the more remote areas of the county, the primary care facilities double as mini-hospitals with 8-10 bed observation posts.

The county hosts a population of 350000 inhabitants, with most concentrated on the east coast of Sweden. Consequently, with modern developments in medicine, clinics are being concentrated to fewer centers. In order to reach patients in the periphery, our reliance on telemedicine, reliable transportation in extreme conditions, and advanced training is principle to our organization.

As our health care system is publicly funded, increased demands on economic thriftiness are placed upon our local organization, and, as such, we have witnessed a reduction in hospital bed space. However, our area is a hugely underserved area with a large indigenous minority population. A study group investigated the conditions and structure in Yellowknife, NWT, Canada where a large arctic landscape with a large indigenous population posed major challenges to administering health care. Our situation is similar.

Kiruna is Sweden's northernmost town, located 200 km above the Arctic Circle. It is remotely located in the middle of northern Lapland. As the population of the town is so small, technically (according to European Union norms) our population is too minor to justify a hospital. However, with one road south and one road west, Kiruna's isolation presents problems for urgent care. Periodically, the roads may be closed due inclement arctic weather. While we have a major airport, we do not have any guarantees that air evacuation is available. The population of Kiruna is primarily Swedish, with a Finnish-speaking minority. We also have a large indigenous population of Sámi, also known as Lapplanders. The Norwegian border is located 130 km away and the coastal town of Narvik, Norway is approximately 200 km west. We are connected to Narvik via both road and rail link.

As such we ambitiously continue to recruit junior physicians and train them to work in our challenging environment. As we try to uphold an excellent standard of care with meager resources, we also hope to entice these junior physicians to remain in Kiruna for future training. Unique in many regards, all interns work independent emergency room and house officer shifts and are forced to make critical decisions from an early point.

Interns begin their training with a weeklong course in trauma care (modified ATLS), emergency medicine and cold weather challenges. Each year, a conference is held for all in stipend to be used during a paid workweek to take a course of choice. Most interns choose courses such as diving medicine, jungle medicine, mountain medicine, expedition medicine, or arctic medicine.

During winter, all interns are required to undergo an additional weeklong training program in mass casualty medicine, mountain rescue, wilderness and mountain pre-hospital medicine. This course is unique and features a number of featured lecturers such as Anna Bågenholm, MD, holder of the world record for hypothermia recovery, Åke Andrén-Sandberg, MD, the man who introduced ATLS to Sweden, and Torbjörn Messner, MD, PhD, who during many years in Kiruna researched atmospheric phenomena and their relation to cardiovascular mortality.

I believe that our region is an ideal site for a future WMS conference and participation and research in the field of wilderness medicine. Our hospital should be at the forefront of wilderness medicine and explore a future within this field. Representatives from many of the above mentioned businesses and research facilities have already gladly informed me that they would love to participate in this field and any future wilderness medicine activity.

So I look forward to working toward my fellowship and future involvement in the Wilderness Medicine Society. The field has much to offer and I think that a future integration of our region in this challenging discipline can lead to further mutual benefit.

Dr. Benjamin Lischner, originally from California, graduated with a BA in biology from UC Davis. A fascination with Scandinavia brought him to Lund, Sweden where he studied Swedish and then received his MD from Lund University. He is now a 3rd-year resident in Family Medicine and Rural Primary Care as well as intern director in the arctic town of Kiruna, Sweden.

photos by Benjamin Lischner

SAVE THE DATES FOR THE WMS 25TH ANNIVERSARY & ANNUAL MEETING

Make plans NOW to join us in our celebration of 25 years of the Wilderness Medical Society at our annual meeting in Snowmass, Colorado, July 26-30, 2008. We've got tons of fun and memorable activities planned, and here's just one of them...

THE WILDERNESS BALL

Tuesday, July 29, 2008, 8:00 p.m.

This promises to be entertaining, hilarious, and heartwarming all at once. You'll get a walk down memory lane at this black-tie formal event. But if you're not the tux and sequins type (as many of us are not), you may choose the option to come in costume—dressed as your favorite wilderness character, injury, disease, or animal. Paul Auerbach is already putting the finishing touches on his...



So all of you WMS Wild Things, start working on your costumes (or tux and sequin rental) now! LINK to this youtube video to get you jazzed up about our reunion and celebration! See you there!

www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2UQif9DFb4

REGISTER AT WWW.WMS.ORG TODAY!

CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

Abstracts are being accepted for the Annual Meeting and Summer Wilderness Medical Conference. Abstract presentations will feature original research covering the spectrum of wilderness medicine. The opportunity to learn about new approaches, advances in medical technology, and epidemiologic studies is unique. Abstracts for oral and poster presentations are invited and are peer-reviewed.

Abstract application forms are available online at www.wms.org under "Research" and then "Abstract Submission." The deadline for the receipt of abstracts for the 25th WMS Anniversary & Wilderness Medical Conference & Annual Meeting is May 15, 2008.

All accepted abstracts will be considered for publication in the Society's journal, Wilderness & Environmental Medicine.