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### My Only Request—Assignments Not too Far From Exotic Beaches.

Just when things seemed at their lowest for this family physician and surfer, exciting opportunities came calling.

BY ROBERT BUDMAN, MD



One of the major fears facing physicians in private practice—beyond those of day-to-day life which are challenging enough—is the fear of economic failure despite the healthy revenue stream most practices enjoy. I failed miserably on the monetary front yet have managed to turn my medical practice into an ongoing adventure in life and medicine. Of course being an avid surfer helped tremendously because the go-with-the-flow lifestyle of the surfing culture lent itself to recovery and reinvention.

There I was a hard working family physician in a dream practice in Orange County, California working for a multi-million-dollar corporation with ownership shares in my pocket. Along came a behemoth medical management firm to buy us out. I was standing on the cusp of millionairehood when travesty struck like a cold surgical knife without anesthetic. As a victim of the FPA Medical Management bankruptcy, my practice was closed, my shares withered to worthlessness, and I suddenly found myself penniless with a pile of bills bemoaning my immediate attention. After 10 years in private practice I felt the emptiness and palpitations brought on by the acute anxiety of being back at square one, like a new medical grad-

uate with mountains of debt.

Fortunately, through common-sense steps and good fortune, I was propelled up from my depths of despair. First, I sold all my assets that had debts attached—namely homes and cars. To my advantage, there wasn't a wife or family complicating my economic and practice ruins. Then a propitious phone call came which sent me into adventurer's heaven.

An acquaintance of my former boss had a loose connection with an attorney working for the Discovery Channel—you know like a friend's boss' second cousin type of deal. The phone call—out of the clear blue sky—went something like this:

Ring, ring.

"Hello?"

"Is this Robert Budman?"

sprang the voice from the other end.

"Yes it is."

"How would you like to be a doctor for a scientific exploration going to the Titanic?"  
"You're kidding right?"

From that surprising turn of events my life took off like a rocket booster headed into deep space. I spent six weeks floating at the mercy of Poseidon on a work ship in the middle of the inhospitable North Atlantic. The crew picked up artifacts from two-and-a-half miles below the sea while I took care of the occasional laceration, brain tumor (no kidding!), and more than the usual share of seasickness among the scientists and film-crew-come-sailors. Then we weathered—or rather hit the lottery in surviving—not one but

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two hurricanes in the perfect storm waters off the Grand Banks. Those waves were just a little too big for any surfing.

When I finally got back on terra firma I found the final legal documents all in order for a medical relief excursion to of the wild lands of Australia. I was now in a full tilt boogie of international locum tenens assignments. As a bonus, the land down under was one of the greatest surf destinations around. My surfboard was packed before my stethoscope, and I traipsed around Queensland for six months as a relief rover doctor for the Queensland Rural Medical Support Agency, all neatly arranged by Global Medical Staffing out of Salt Lake City, Utah.

I saw more than my share of tropical diseases, snake bites, and rugged Aussies while hopping from town to town by every means of transportation imaginable. To top it off I went back for a second tour of duty because the first was such a great experience. The fact that I was able to surf several world-class surfing beaches (clothing optional I might add) helped to draw me back for that extra service stripe.

Technology kept me in touch with my life here in the States while on those exotic excursions. Preparing in advance for a great length of time away from home, I purchased a laptop computer. It did come in handy at times for e-mail and diary keeping, along with the occasional spider smashing and common-sense-dictated updates to friends and family and on-line bill-paying services. However, I found Australia to be particularly up to date technologically. Every puny town from dingo-overrun Fraser Island (without any paved roads) to the wild surf-pounded shores of Margaret River along the Indian Ocean had a publicly accessible Internet hook up. Except for my own writing endeavors, a computer actually was an un-

necessary burden, especially whilst toting a couple of satchels and a six-and-a-half foot surf board (my surrogate spouse).

Today's super hi-techies and less monetarily challenged could go as far as wireless telephone purchases with cords for computer hook ups, but I found using the public access Internet to be more rewarding. I flirted with the cute girls at the Internet cafes and usually scored free computer use once they found out I was the mercenary doctor come all the way from America to aid the Australian people.

I did buy a prepaid cellular phone while zooming around Australia, but I didn't go as far as the wireless computer hookups. To top it off, I managed to sell my phone at the airport terminal as I left for the USA.

It seemed like my life re-ignited just when things looked their bleakest. I popped in some time as a "Love Boat" doctor and a couple of other stateside locum tenens assignments along the way, too. Like one hears so many times, remember to stop and smell the roses, appreciate life's highways and moreover its byways. The most important part of a gravestone isn't the birth and death years but how one lives during the hyphen between those years. I've learned to appreciate those lessons all too well, along with the good fortune of health and happiness that far outweighs any amount of money. And many thanks to Mother Nature for providing me with good surf along the way. ■

*Robert Budman, MD, is a locum tenens family practitioner based in Orange, California but is frequently found surfing in Huntington Beach. He is currently working on a cruise ship in the Caribbean or a locum tenens assignment for CompHealth.*

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