

# Viva Las Vacaciones



# Health Watch

by Cynthia Scanlon

illustration by Robert Diercksmeier

Most Phoenixians, either looking for new scenery to explore or just wanting to broaden their horizons, have at one time or another taken a trip out of the country, usually down Mexico way. The plan is usually to take in some sights, pick up a colorful throw rug or blanket to brighten the hallway, and maybe sip an iced-down beer at an outdoor cafe.

What's not in the plan is getting sick or injured. But it can happen. And depending on where you are, state-of-the-art medical facilities—like the ones most are become accustomed to in the U.S., can be few and far between. Yet, one doctor is setting out to change all that.

Seven years ago, Dr. Marcus Engelman, then-director of St. Joseph's Hospital Emergency Department in Phoenix, witnessed a serious car accident while on vacation in Rosarito, Mexico. A woman had been thrown through the windshield of a car and critically injured. Since the local hospital did not have the proper medical equipment to treat the woman, Engelman kept the woman alive until the ambulance could make its way through the streets of Mexico and get her to a hospital facility in Tijuana.

Engelman's medical expertise saved the woman's life. The entire experience showed Engelman the lack of proper medical care in Mexico and propelled him to develop better medical standards in the country. "I was telling my dad I couldn't believe they were that far behind in terms of training and facilities," says Engelman, president and CEO of Ameri+Med Urgent Care USA LLC Hospitals and Medical Centers in Mexico. "I waited around and waited around and assumed someone was going to do it. They didn't do it."

So Engelman set out to change the way medicine is practiced in Mexico. His goal was to create superior medical care for

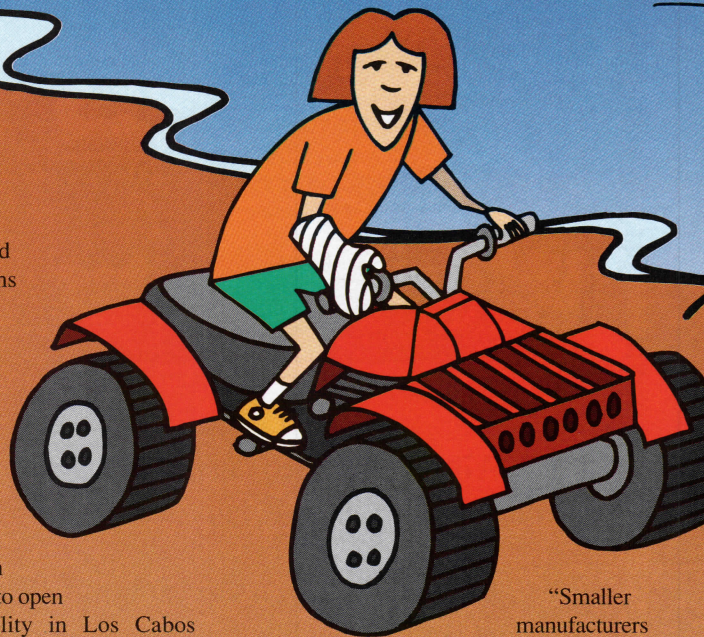
tourists, foreign residents and nationals, and eliminate difficult and time-consuming problems in obtaining quality medical care in Mexico.

Right away, he began shipping major medical equipment from the U.S. Last fall he opened the first Ameri+Med Hospital and Medical Center in Puerto Vallarta. He plans to open a second hospital facility in Los Cabos sometime this fall. Additional hospital openings are scheduled for the future.

The hospitals are equipped with the latest diagnostic technology and offer a full range of routine and emergency care. The facility is staffed 24 hours a day with highly trained and experienced bi-lingual physicians and nurses. "We will open 15 or 20 facilities across Mexico in the next three to five years," says Engelman. "Some will be bigger and some smaller. It will depend on the needs of the community."

Originally Engelman wanted the facilities to be outpatient only. "But people like the care so much they don't want to go back to the U.S. or go to another hospital," he says. "So we converted out trauma rooms into operating rooms."

According to the U.S. Travel Data Center, Americans took 38 million international trips in 1994. These kinds of numbers have made insurance companies aware of the need for accessible quality health care on a worldwide basis to meet traveling demands. One such company is Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona.



"Smaller manufacturers are opening plants

in Mexico and service companies are expanding abroad," says Patrick Hays, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona president and CEO. "We live and work in the Global Village. And, the reality is, we can become ill or need treatment there, too."

BlueCard Worldwide allows members traveling or living abroad to receive inpatient care at participating hospitals located at major travel destinations throughout the world. Patients are responsible for the same charges they would pay at U.S. hospitals, including copayments, coinsurance, and deductibles, instead of having to pay a hospital bill upon discharge and then filing for reimbursement.

Currently, BlueCard Worldwide hospitals are located in 14 countries in Western Europe, Israel, Japan, and Mexico. Hospitals in eight countries in Central and South America, Asia and the Caribbean were added to the program this year.

Qualifying hospitals must meet certain criteria to be considered for the program, including having blood supplies that comply



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with World Health Organization blood standards, English-speaking personnel on staff, 24-hour emergency services and an intensive care unit. "Our goal is to make the Blue Cross Blue Shield a mark," says Richard M. Hannon, senior vice president, external affairs. "Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Arizona is in partnership with Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Texas. We have a joint venture company called Arizona Texas International, which has contacts with eight hospitals in Mexico that any Blue Cross customer in the U.S. can use."

While Hannon agrees travelers will find high-tech medical facilities similar to the ones in the U.S. throughout Western Europe, he feels the availability of quality health care in many communist bloc countries and most of Latin America will be spotty. But he sees that improving, especially in Mexico. "You're seeing more and more relationships between American hospitals and Mexican hospitals and as Mexico stabilizes and we see the continuation of the recovery down there, I think you'll see it accelerate over the next few years," says Hannon. "Before the collapse of the peso, we saw lots of interest in medical groups and their interest in Mexico. If we see another year of recovery and economic growth in Mexico, I think you'll see that start again."

Hannon is delighted to see this kind of interest because of the numbers of people that travel to Mexico every year. Health care in Mexico was recently brought close to home for Hannon, who had a neighbor and friend hurt in Rocky Point while riding on an all terrain vehicle. "He was okay ultimately, but when they took him for health care services, they took him to a maternity ward because it was the only thing open," says Hannon. "Had he been seriously hurt, he would have been dead."

For people traveling with Club Med, a company that owns and operates vacation resorts in the U.S., Mexico, the Caribbean, French Polynesia, Asia and the South Pacific, insurance is part of every vacation package. "We have doctors on call and nurses 24 hours a day, and that is very reassuring," says Edwina Arnold of Club Med. "We have a pamphlet we send to every vacationer which gives suggestions on how to stay healthy."

Club Med advises tourists, no matter where they are traveling, to give consideration to health concerns long before they depart. Some countries require vaccinations before entering the country. Club Med also advises travelers to use common sense when traveling within or outside the U.S. "(We remind them that they) can't go off and expect to live the way they do in New York City or Phoenix if they are in a remote country," says Arnold. "People have to use their head."

Still, accidents can and do happen. For the most serious, Ameri+Med has started the first air evacuation service in Puerto Vallarta. The service provides emergency air transport, ►

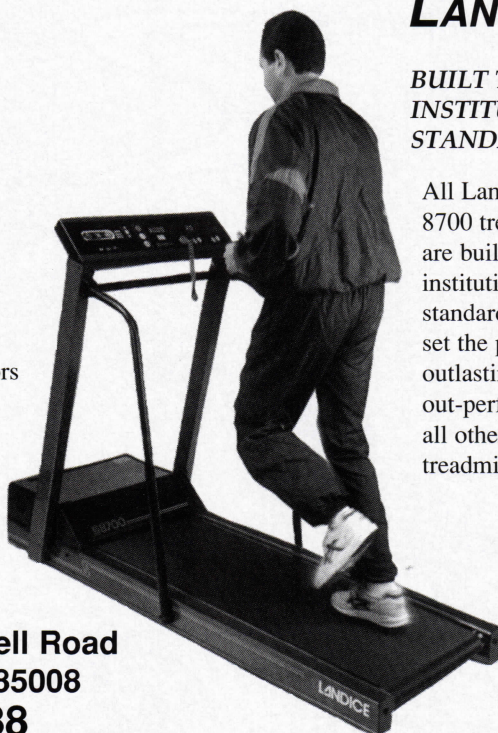
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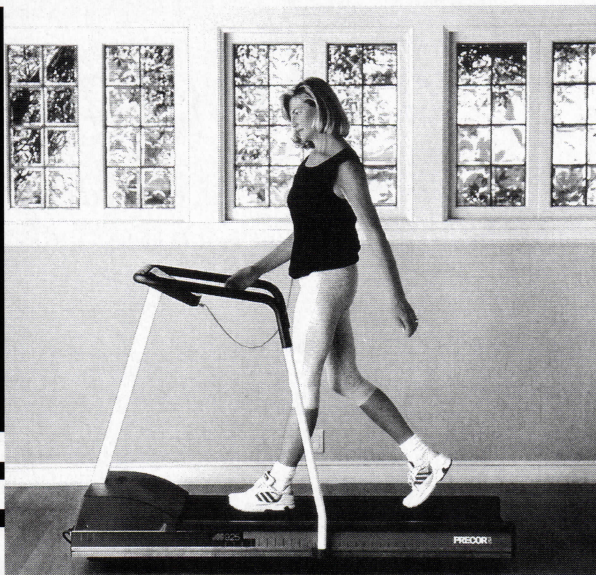
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which is able to depart with a patient to the U.S. within one hour of being called. Ameri+Med doctors and nurses, specialists in emergency medical intensive care, accompany patients on each flight.

"We use our emergency medicine doctors and nurses to accompany the evacuation back to the U.S. or Canada," says Engelman. "It gives us easy access to Guadalajara, Acapulco, Mazatlan, Baja California, Cabo San Lucas. There's no one in the states that can get down there that fast. By the time they load and fuel up, it would take most air evacuation services in the U.S. four hours to get to Mexico."

According to Hannon, an air evacuation service is of prime importance for a hospital in Mexico.

He says it is sometimes difficult to get approval to get an air evacuation from the U.S. into Mexico and it can take hours, if not days, to get approval for the plane to go in.

"And then they can get caught up in whether or not it is a helicopter or fixed wing," says Hannon. "What if someone is somewhere that you can't land a fixed-wing aircraft?"

For physicians who might be contemplating doctoring in Mexico, Engelman cautions that traveling down south and hanging out a shingle will not be easy.

"To practice medicine in Mexico, you need to have a medical license from Mexico," he says. "So anyone thinking they can go down on a weekend and decide to do surgery or open up one of these facilities is sadly mistaken."

Engelman says the project has been met with a great deal of positive feedback and respect from the Mexican government.

"It brings tourist dollars in, which they love, and we employ lots of Mexican personnel, whom we pay well," he says. "And we pay our taxes in Mexico."

Some might ask: Why would a financially and professionally secure physician from the U.S. take on the risk and effort of starting a new hospital in another country?

For Engelman, it's not about money. He says the hospital still struggles financially. He says it has to do with giving back, with wanting to have an impact on the world.

"I'm trying to build something that has never been done before," he says. "Twenty percent of the people we take care of write us letters telling us that they felt like they had found a family. There is no amount of money that can make up for something like that."

**AB**

Cynthia Scanlon is a Tempe free-lance writer.