After many years working as a doctor, and at the age of 52, I was given the chance to take charge of and have medical responsibility for the German Neumayer Station in the Antarctic as doctor and head of the station, during the 20th winter of the station's operation.

After completing 11 years at school, I first became a nurse. External matriculation opened the way for me to study medicine. I specialised in surgery and traumatology and practised this for many years in a hospital taking all types of patients. A wide medical knowledge base, including emergency care, was a good foundation for being a doctor in an extreme corner of Earth.

The kinds of illnesses seen in Antarctica have changed a great deal over the years. Frost injuries, hypothermia, undernourishment and malnutrition, as well as illnesses caused by lack of vitamins, are all things of the past, thanks to the excellently equipped stations and the modern, purpose-made clothes available. Because everyone undergoes a thorough examination before spending the winter there, it is almost exclusively healthy people who stay in such extreme places. In this way, the spectrum of illnesses corresponds more or less to that found in the patients' native countries.

In addition to the classic duties of a doctor, I had to fulfil the role usually reserved for medical assistants:

- Nursing and caring for sick patients
- Cleaning the hospital
- Taking and developing x-rays of teeth and extremities, evaluating them, and taking care of the developing solution
- Maintaining a sterile environment
- Maintaining the anaesthetic equipment
- Assembling the patient beds, including splints, extensions, etc.
- Maintaining and ordering medical supplies
- Keeping a sickness log book, similar to that kept on a ship
- Testing all the medical equipment according to appropriate legislation
- Regular bacteriological testing of the drinking water
- Regular care and examination of all persons staying the winter by means of blood tests in a dry laboratory
Dental problems were the commonest complaints. I had prepared myself for this beforehand and studied basic dental science. Besides fillings and inlays, I even had to extract a tooth! It was a huge success!

The atmosphere of the driest continent led to further, chronic problems. Everybody needed intensive nose and skin care because of the dryness of the skin. Fatigue eczema could be avoided with good care. Both a serious inflammation of the eye and a dislocation of the shoulder were problems experienced during our winter at the station. In the summer, other minor accidents were added to the list.

Because, close to the poles, it is possible to reach high altitudes in an aeroplane very quickly (sea level to approx. 3000 metres), illnesses such as high-altitude sickness were also experienced. Fortunately though, because the weather was generally clear, it was possible to give these patients the best possible treatment very rapidly, by bringing them back down to sea level!

The German Neumayer Station is legally deemed to be a ship, so as head of the station, I had more or less the same powers as a ship's captain. Fortunately, I had no need to put this power into practice. Many other duties were waiting for me in this capacity though:

- Supporting the scientists in their research
- Assisting in all tasks which contributed to communal life (cleaning, carrying out the rubbish, etc.)
- Keeping the station log book
- Maintaining standards of behaviour and if necessary, challenging inappropriate behaviour
- Keeping all safety equipment in co-operation with the engineer
- Setting up first-aid cabins and checking their contents
- Carrying out inventories in all areas of the station, and placing orders
- Reporting to the Alfred Wegener Institute
- Recording and registering oil accidents according to the Antarctic Contract
- Taking part in radio and television interviews, live or recorded
- Representing the Federal Republic of Germany: e.g., sending Christmas and Midwinter greetings to international representatives of other nations engaged in antarctic research
- Acting as hostess to international guests
- Hoisting flags for international visits

The German Neumayer Station has been staffed by surgeons up until now. As the people staying over-winter are basically healthy, and the most common problems expected are dental or accidents, this decision is absolutely logical. Other countries employ general practitioners or doctors with other specialist qualifications, but in any case anyone employed as a medical practitioner in Antarctica must meet national registration requirements. A role which combines doctor's duties with heading up the station is by no means always the case. Unfortunately, there is no medical research programme in Neumayer analogous to the long-term scientific research. It seems that there is currently very little public
interest in such studies, so that financing a serious research project would be difficult, if one were developed by an individual.

The classic career paths in Germany are sadly not becoming more flexible. Rather one must expect disadvantages if one deviates from the norm. I found fitting back into the set hierarchy in a German clinic difficult on returning, and this step must be carefully considered. However, if "career" is interpreted as a path of personal experience and further development, then there is a huge benefit to be reaped from such a move. Working in an extreme continent in very free, independent conditions with an insight into many scientific jobs broadens one's own views greatly. I had hardly ever been able to learn so much from other fields as I did in those months: Geophysics, meteorology, and atmospheric chemistry research went on throughout the winter, with all their accompanying problems. In the summer, ice researchers joined us, collating information on the climatic history of Earth by taking ice drill samples. Never were the differences between basic research and applied science so clear as in those months--doctors really do think "differently". But the exchange of knowledge, in spite of all the discipline barriers, was excellent and meaningful for everybody.

Nature can be experienced at first hand: snow storms, hurricanes, and temperatures down to below -40°C force one to take shelter in the station. Later on, sastrugis (snow drifts) form exquisite works of art, created in the wind tunnel! And one recognises that "white" does not mean just "white". You have the chance to observe emperor penguins throughout a whole year's cycle and/or to see newborn Weddell seals on the ice. The extremely clean air of Antarctica and indescribably beautiful light effects in the sky during the polar night and also during the antarctic summer will remain unforgettable experiences. The most impressive thing for me was, however, the unending silence, which I had the pleasure of experiencing on wind-still days. ... As I write now, surrounded by the typically hectic conditions back at home, the memory is practically unreal.

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