

WRITTEN BY
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BEN EDMONSONPETER HACKETT, M.D.
High Riser

Spend an hour with Chicago native Dr. Peter Hackett and you'll walk away inspired. Having earned his bachelor of science degree from Marquette University and his medical degree from University of Illinois College of Medicine, Hackett's humble demeanor belies an adventurous spirit evidenced in his spending the past three decades pioneering research in high altitude sickness. Currently, he is one of the preeminent experts in the field.

A twist of fate landed him in Nepal, where he studied the effects of altitude sickness on climbers. "I was supposed to stay three months, I stayed six years," he reflects. He released his first paper on the illness in 1976, launching his career. "I was very lucky because at the time, there was one paper published on high altitude sickness every 10 years. Now it's more like 10 papers per year. I was lucky that I stumbled upon this niche at the time that I did. It made my career," he explains.

After stints doing emergency medicine in Alaska, Grand Junction and Montrose, Hackett moved to Telluride in 1995, lured primarily by the town's lofty altitude. Under his leadership, Telluride's ER became Colorado's first Level V trauma center. He also was successful in uniting the efforts of the ski patrol, EMTs and search and rescue teams under one umbrella.

At the moment, Hackett is in the midst of developing

the Institute for Altitude Medicine, or what he calls "the biggest challenge of my life," which is perhaps why his characteristic nonchalance subsides when speaking of it. The center will have three objectives: to treat people suffering from altitude health problems, to educate people and to pioneer research in the field. In doing so, Hackett hopes to create the premier altitude medicine facility in the world.

Hackett exudes an understated cool and Zen-like sagacity; no wonder the Dalai Lama is the person who inspires him most on earth. He has ventured to the top and the bottom of the earth, the Arctic and Antarctica, as well as to South America, Patagonia, Tibet, Russia, Siberia, Pakistan, India and East Africa. Some of his proudest accomplishments are, in his words, "Climbing Everest, particularly at a time when not many people were doing it, and becoming an expert in my field and the Institute for Altitude Medicine." He neglects to mention that he founded the Himalayan Rescue Association in Kathmandu and the Denali Medical Research Project in Anchorage; or the fact, *ahem*, he is the doctor for the Rolling Stones.

Hackett says, "The Rolling Stones hired me to be with them in Mexico City, because of concern for the high altitude. We got along, and after Keith fell out of a tree and sustained a head injury, they wanted a full-time doctor for the remainder of the Bigger Bang Tour. Their medical director, Dr. Brad Connor, arranged for me to tour 17 cities with them. It was fascinating; the Stones are "over the top" in professionalism, talent and the money they spend."

Hackett spends what little downtime he has climbing mountains with his 12-year-old son. It is perhaps in his recipe for happiness that we can best understand him and his accomplishments. "Find a way of being that brings out the best in you and put yourself in situations that bring out the best in you. Find your purpose and follow it," he declares. In these words, we find a little nugget of wisdom to apply to our lives. ♦

Climbing Everest when it wasn't vogue; founding the Himalayan Rescue Association and the Denali Medical Research Project; and is the doctor for the Rolling Stones.