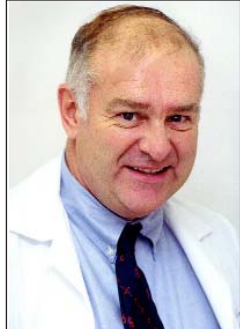


## House Calls:

### On the Front Lines

by Dr. Michael Lacombe



*Dedicated to MaineGeneral Medical Center's nurses, the following fictional story of medicine is from Bedside: The Art of Medicine by Michael A. LaCombe, published by University of Maine Press.*

It snowed for three days. From the vast picture window, Hammersmith watched the north wind drive the snow into abstract anaglyphs against the sides of the buildings, sculpt it into dunes rising to and above the cornices of the chalets.

He turned, glanced at his wife, heaved a sigh and began pacing the length of the room. He was tired of skiing and reading novels and ready to return to his job. The weather's trap had filled him with a restless sense. He looked again at his wife, narrowed his eyes against her quiet smirk, then moved behind her to massage her shoulders.

"Why is it that when I'm at the hospital and up to my neck in patients and politics, why is it I find myself wishing I could be trapped by a snowstorm in a chalet with you? And then, when it does happen, why do I get so impatient to be back there?"

His wife snuggled her shoulders against his hands and said nothing. No need for her to state the answer they both already knew. Contented, she returned to her book.

The banging at the chalet door interrupted Hammersmith's massage. He opened the door to a drift of snow falling across the sill. A man in a one-piece jumpsuit, with helmet and ski goggles, and knee-deep in the powder, stepped inside. His left side was caked with snow and ice driven against him by the wind. He looked like some half-frosted gingerbread man.

"You the doc? They need you right away at the hospital," said the man.

"I'm not that kind of a doctor," said Hammersmith.

"Well, what kind of a doctor are you? They told me to come and fetch you," said the man.

"I'm a hospital administrator. I train young doctors at a university. I direct patient care, but I no longer take care of patients myself. Haven't for years," said Hammersmith.

"Philip, you are so a doctor!" said his wife. Turning her attention to the man, she said, "He's the best doctor you'll find anywhere."

The man shifted. Snow fell his jumpsuit. "Look Doc, they have a man with a heart attack at the hospital and no doctor's there to take care of him. Put on this suit and I'll run you down in my snow machine."

Hammersmith hesitated, met his wife's stare, shrugged, then climbed into the jumpsuit. The two men left the chalet. Winter had driven the landscape into a whiteout of confusion. Hammersmith could make out the dark hump of the nearest neighboring chalet through the swirling snow, just.

"Sit down behind me and grab hold of my waist, and keep your head down. I got one pair of goggles and I need them more than you do," explained the man.

After 15 spine-jarring minutes on the snow machine, Philip J. Hammersmith, MD, PhD, MACC, MACP, MRCP (Hon.), resplendent in a lavender-trimmed silver Ski-Doo outfit, entered the small country hospital. He stood in the foyer stamping the snow from himself when the charge nurse approached him.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "Our internist is over the mountain, 30 miles away, snowbound. We have some sick patients and you were the closest doctor we could find."

Hammersmith regarded the nurse's knickers, knee socks, and ski boots, and then asked, "How can I help you?"

"The man in room 'A' is having an infarct, a big infarct. We need to get him going. The patient in 'C' is a GI bleeder. 'B' is a pneumonia, I think. There are three more patients waiting to be signed in. And the ward nurse needs to speak to you about some inpatients when you get a minute."

Unfamiliar with patients, distanced by droves of housestaff from the immediacy of patient care, Hammersmith's mouth suddenly went dry. He wished at that point that he had had his pipe and could scrape, stuff, tamp, and minister to it while stalling for time.

"Get him going?" asked Hammersmith.

"The infarct? He's having a lot of pain. His blood pressure's way up. He has a lot of ectopy. We should probably get some nitroglycerine going and start amiodarone."

Hammersmith regarded the nurse. He wished his residents could be as decisive.

"Look, Miss...Miss..."

"Call me Shirley."

"Shirley, I really haven't taken care of a patient for years. I occasionally do teaching rounds, but mostly I'm an administrator. I run a hospital, direct training programs for residents. But I really don't belong in an emergency room."

Shirley smiled. "You're all we've got, Doctor. You'll have to do," she answered.

*(To be concluded next week.)*

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