

This is my Deer Isle

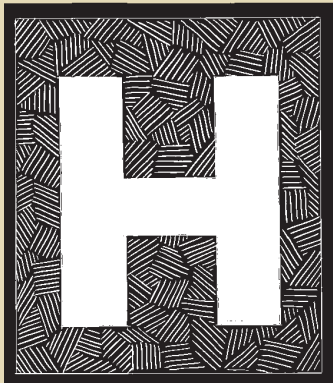
By Thomas C. Garland, M.D., M.P.H.

During the 24 years that I practiced medicine on Deer Isle, just off the coast of Maine, a variation of the following event happened to me three times.

Each winter, even the mild ones, there are a couple of snowstorms that set your teeth on edge. We all know when they are coming. The snow begins to pile up during the day. Patients start to call into the Island Medical Center to cancel appointments. The lights flicker, and we think about closing early so the staff can get home safely. It keeps snowing. The power goes out and the generator comes on. All patients have canceled and the staff has gone home. One doctor remains behind, waiting until the usual closing time to field calls and handle emergencies, then heads home. The roads are passable, but barely; there's only a car or two on the road, and these fishtail up the hills. The evening is spent with family—candles and lanterns, bottles of water, early to bed, beeper on the bedside table. One last look out at the driveway. It's really coming down. More than a foot already and blowing. Hope there are no calls tonight.

Can't breathe: At 2:00 a.m., the phone rings. I'm awake anyway. The caller says, "My husband can't breathe. He feels like there's an elephant on his chest. I just called the ambulance." And then the beeper goes off.

Into my clothes and out the door. The snow is up to my knees and slides down into my boots. I'm glad I left the barn door open. The car bursts out into the snow mounded in the driveway. I thank Subaru for four-wheel drive, and then I am onto the road, which is not much better. Either it hasn't been plowed yet or it has blown over again. No matter. Slowly, creeping, trying to stay on the road, finally reaching



SUZANNE DEJOHN

The Deer Isle plow pulls off to the side of the road. Eternity will have to wait, because the brilliant hospital reaches out its arms and gathers us in like a mother embraces a lost child.

"Point of View" provides a personal perspective on some issue in medicine. Garland is a 1965 graduate of Dartmouth College and a 1971 graduate of Dartmouth Medical School's two-year preclinical program. He served for two years in the Peace Corps in Thailand before entering DMS, completed his M.D. at Tufts University School of Medicine, and then did his residency in internal medicine at Boston's St. Elizabeth's Hospital and Jamaica Plain VA Medical Center. He settled in Maine in 1976 and practiced for 24 years at Island Medical Center on Deer Isle. The second-largest island off the Maine coast, it is connected to the mainland by a causeway and bridge and is home to the towns of Deer Isle and Stonington. Garland was the lone doctor at Island Medical Center when he arrived there, and there were three doctors and a physician assistant by the time he left. In 2000, with M.P.H.'s newly earned through a Loma Linda University off-campus program, he and his wife, a pharmacist, decided to trade rural medicine for inner-city medicine. They moved to Washington, D.C., where Garland now practices with Unity Health Care, a nonprofit agency that offers medical care and human services to homeless and medically underserved people throughout the District of Columbia. He wrote this essay at the time he left Deer Isle, to capture his feelings about his 24 years as a "country doctor."

the patient's house. Someone says, "He's in there." One look says it all: sweaty, ashen, gasping. The ambulance is already here. Oxygen. Vitals. Nitro. Onto the stretcher. Wallow, slip, and slide out to the ambulance. Aspirin. IV. Monitor. Medicines.

Then we set out on the longest journey in the world: from Deer Isle to Blue Hill Memorial Hospital in the teeth of a winter storm. The ambulance is all over the road. It takes courage to drive this rig on a night like this. We reach Deer Isle village. Skidding. Lurching. We pass the high school. The sweat from my forehead drips onto the patient's arm.

"Am I going to make it, Doc?"

"Of course you are. Your job is to relax and think about the grandchildren."

Pitching, sliding: Blood pressure 60/40. Lungs full. Eternity looms. North Deer Isle. One minute at

a time. One endless, pitching, sliding minute at a time.

Then something changes. The light in the ambulance takes on a different quality. A dull, yellow, mysterious glow begins to fill the back of our rig. Suddenly everything is brightly lit and we hear a sound—a rough engine's growl, then a crash and a steady roar. It's the plow. The Deer Isle plow. I don't know where it came from, but it found us and it's plowing the way for us now. The ambulance steadies on the road and picks up speed. We follow a plume of swirling snow, and it seems as if the balance of the universe has shifted.

"How's the elephant?" I ask.

"Not quite so bad."

Like a miracle: The sweat is drying. We reach the causeway leading to the mainland and go up and over the bridge. The Deer Isle plow pulls off to the side of the road into the darkness, and, like a miracle, the Sedgwick plow is right there. It steams up Schoolhouse Hill in front of us, and the ambulance driver lets out a whoop. Soon Caterpillar Hill is behind us, too, and by the time we reach the Blue Hill town line, all the roads have been cleared. Eternity will have to wait, because the brilliant hospital reaches out its arms and gathers us in like a mother embraces a lost child.

The plows continue to work all night, and all three patients survive because there are heroes in my Deer Isle. Heroes that nobody knows. Heroes that nobody thanks. Heroes in every snowplow and ambulance; in every household, fishing boat, store, and classroom. Mother Nature does not divide them, nor do I: native and transplant; Deer Isle villager and Stonington villager; rich and poor; gay and straight; Christian, Buddhist, black, white, and Asian.

These are my heroes.

This is my Deer Isle. ■