

Massachusetts, New York State, and Maine. And DeGasta adds that many veterans who could easily afford private-sector care prefer what they see as the better-coordinated care offered by the VA system.

Awards: In 2007, the White River VA received its sixth-in-a-row Carey Award, which the VA presents to the top performers, on the basis of measured excellence, among its 150 hospitals.

DeGasta also casts his regard for the White River facility in very personal terms. He arrived there in the 1970s as a social worker, left for posts at other VA hospitals, and then did a stint at the system's headquarters in Washington, D.C. After that, he says, "I could have chosen any place in the system, but I wanted to come back here."

O'Donnell and DeGasta are enormously proud of the quality of care that patients receive at White River. Even during times of budgetary belt-tightening—including an unsuccessful 1999 move by central VA managers to turn White River into an outpatient clinic, the focus has stayed not only on doing things right but on persistently measuring the quality of the care that is delivered there.

O'Donnell offers a final assay of the quality of Dartmouth's "gem" in White River by saying, "Other medical schools would be really lucky if they had a relationship with a VA that's as good as our VA. On every measure of quality you can think of, the VA either equals or beats the private sector."

JAMES DICLERICO

CLINICAL OBSERVATION

In this section, we highlight the human side of clinical academic medicine, putting a few questions to a physician at DMS-DHMC.

Peter DeLong, M.D.

Assistant Professor of Medicine

The only interventional pulmonologist in northern New England, DeLong specializes in the diagnosis and palliation of thoracic cancers. He has been at Dartmouth-Hitchcock since 2004.

What made you decide to become a physician?

There were many reasons for submitting to the endless training, deferred gratification, and institutionalized infantilization: the combination of applied science and direct contact with people in need made it fascinating. In addition, it was one of those fields I thought could never be



mastered and so would remain interesting for a whole career. Later, I came to realize that being a physician allows for, and sometimes compels, many different skill sets—research, direct patient communication,

managing resources, teaching colleagues and trainees, making public presentations—all in some way related to helping sick people. The combination of these various challenges can be fun and is rarely boring.

Of what professional accomplishment are you most proud?

I was involved in work showing that lung cancers suppress the immune response against them, and that this suppression can be decreased to help the body fight tumors.

What advice would you offer to someone who is contemplating going into your field?

Regarding medicine generally, I tell people that if they can be happy doing something else, they should do it. Medicine these days has some rewards, but it is endlessly regulated, certified, and

credentialed to the point of distraction—especially if you practice in more than one area. On the other hand, there is still an incredible amount of patient care, teaching, and research work to be done if you can get into a sustainable position to do it. So it's *caveat emptor*.

What's your favorite nonwork activity?

I like to build things. I've built furniture, guitars, houses, a sauna, a boat. Although I have not had much free time recently, when I do, building is one of the first things I gravitate to. I also like to escape to the woods with my dog and a pair of snowshoes.

What music is in your CD player right now?

Emmylou Harris, *Beggars Banquet* (by the Rolling Stones), Patty Griffin, and Metallica.

What are your favorite books?

I have always loved *A River Runs Through It* by Norman Maclean. I got to meet him once—he's a small man, not what I expected. He was delightful. I also like *The Cider House Rules*—John Irving coached me as a high-school wrestler. I love his view of the world, especially in that book. *Out of Africa* is a beautifully written book that I have reread five or six times. Mostly I read history, topical biographies, and travel books.

What about movies?

My taste in movies is pretty random. *My Life as a Dog* is a favorite. Also *The Jericho Mile*; *Cal*; *The Player*; *A Man for All Seasons*; *Shakespeare in Love*; *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*; and *The Departed* (because I grew up in Boston). They are not really related in any way except that I think they succeed at what they attempt, so I take them on their own terms.

What is your idea of earthly happiness?

Fifty-odd acres in a pleasant place and time to enjoy it.

What is a talent that you wish you had?

I would like to be able to write music easily.

