

Alaska Medicine

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The Annual Magazine Of The Alaska State Medical Association

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Editor: Dave Rush

Contributors:
Paula Colescott, MD
Kelly L. Drew, PhD
Kathy Espin
Mouhcine Guettabi, PhD
Tracey Haas, DO, MPH
Philip Hall
Michael Haugen
Cassie Jeanes
Kathleen McCoy
Gregg Motonaga, MD
Sohrab Pathan
Jill Rush
Kristine Sharp
George Stransky, MD
Matt Sullivan
Chloe Tanaka
Sierra Winegamer

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Advertising & Circulation:
Dave Rush
Communications Director, ASMA
4107 Laurel St.
Anchorage, AK 99508-5334
(907) 562-0304
(907) 561-2063 (fax)
drush@asmadocs.org

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COVER STORY



7 Rockin' for healthier women

Dr. Joanie Mayer Hope “wanted a career that was going to allow me to work toward the greater good in some way, towards making social change.” Eventually it dawned on her: “All of these social and political issues are within the health care system. I wanted to have a skill that I could use within that system to advocate for change.” As a singer and guitarist with the band N.E.D., the Anchorage gynecologic oncologist is an effective crusader for women’s health.

FACES OF THE LAST FRONTIER



13 Pediatrician pilot with a vault of stories

Dr. Alex Russell is as much at ease teaching student pilots to fly airplanes as he is treating children for whatever ails them. He once even took a year off from medicine to fly full-time. Eventually he returned to pediatrics in Soldotna but continued flying in his off hours. His airborne adventures are abundant.

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How many ways can the same notion be freshly expressed?

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ON THE COVER

Photo illustration of Joanie Mayer Hope, MD, belting out a song with N.E.D.

Of rock docs, frequent fliers and marijuana

Presenting the same basic concept on this page year after year and trying keep the idea fresh for readers is a challenge. Mind you, I'm not complaining. I am fortunate to live in one of the world's most fascinating, invigorating regions. But sometimes I get concerned about boring people with the repetition. I mean, how many ways can one say Alaska is an incredible place to live and offers a unique environment for practicing medicine?

This magazine mainly goes out to the physicians and PAs who are members of the Alaska State Medical Association and to several hundred second- and third-year general internal medicine residents in the northern tier states – in some cases, people who have never experienced the wonder of Alaska.



DAVE RUSH
EDITOR

This publication tells the ASMA members what some of your more interesting colleagues are up to, what research is being done in or about our state, and other topics you might find relevant to your profession and/or your lifestyle.

For the residents, our purpose is simple: Convince you to come up and practice in Alaska when you complete your training. We want you, we need you, so here's a little taste of the Last Frontier. It's a place where most everyone, not just doctors, mixes business with pleasure whenever possible.

The subject of our cover story, Dr. Joanie Mayer Hope, is a gynecologic oncologist whose cause is educating women about "down there" health issues, particularly cancer. But she doesn't just hand out helpful brochures to her patients. No, she has started a support organization called Let Every Woman Know, and she sings and plays guitar with a rock band called N.E.D. (No Evidence of Disease). I admire how she has merged two professions for a common purpose.

In a similar vein, Dr. Alex Russell is an avid pilot and flight instructor, in addition to being a longtime pediatrician on the Kenai Peninsula. In the 1970s Dr. Russell fed his love of flying and his commitment to medicine by starting a medical evacuation service. Think he's got stories to tell? Oh, yeah. Check out Kathy Espin's feature on him.

Beyond the personalities, this issue includes a report on a virology lab at the University of Alaska Anchorage, where Assistant Professor Eric Bortz and his undergraduate students are conducting cutting-edge biomedical research; DocbookMD co-founder Dr. Tracey Haas' discussion of mobile communication platform problems and solutions from a physician's perspective; and a study of current and future medical costs of childhood obesity in Alaska.

But first, a word about legalizing marijuana. Should Alaskans vote yes or no on Ballot Measure 2 in November? Representatives of the two sides present their arguments in a package that starts on the page to your right.

Yes, we have it all in Alaska: rock docs, physician pilots, medical research, state-of-the-art mobile apps, public health matters that need to be addressed, and contentious politics. Add that to myriad opportunities to fish, hunt, participate in a variety of winter and summer sports and recreational activities, art, culture, our phenomenal people and spectacular scenery, and you've got (*drumroll, please*) an incredible place to live and a unique environment for practicing medicine.

Now, where have I read that before?

UPBEAT FOR 'DOWN THERE' AWARENESS

Dr. Joanie Mayer Hope and 5 fellow oncologists from 4 other states use music to promote knowledge about gynecologic cancer. They call their band N.E.D., for No Evidence of Disease, and perform around the country in a campaign to help more women become "down there aware." The Anchorage doctor's saga begins on the next page.

*Photo by
George
Stransky, MD*



Dr. Joanie Mayer Hope and five other gynecologic oncologists present a concert as N.E.D.

‘I WANTED TO HAVE A SKILL THAT I COULD USE ... TO ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE’

By Matt Sullivan

If Dr. Joanie Mayer Hope hadn't found her calling in medicine, she'd probably be singing somewhere. Even after finding that calling, you still might find her singing somewhere.

“When I decided to go to medical school, I told my parents, ‘If music ever takes off, don't get your hopes too high on me becoming a doctor,’” she recalls with a laugh.

But become a doctor she did, and she's currently the only board-certified gynecologic oncologist in Alaska. She also serves as director of gynecologic oncology at Alaska Native Medical Center and Providence Alaska Cancer Center.

She didn't have to give up her musical dreams, though, and N.E.D. – short for No Evidence of Disease, the band she formed with five other gynecologic oncologists from across the country – achieves many of the same goals that led her to medicine in the first place.

Joanie Mayer Hope, MD, 46, grew up in Boulder, Colo., and studied economics at Stanford. In her 20s, she worked in criminal defense as a private investigator. Later she earned a master's in intercultural relations and was an educator and consultant in diversity and multicultural education, working with schools, nonprofits and health care organizations.

"I wanted a career that was going to allow me to work toward the greater good in some way, towards making social change," she explains.

Eventually she felt there was more she could be doing to that end. "I made a big change and decided, 'You know what? All of these social and political issues are within the health care system,'" she says of her decision finally to go to medical school.

"I wanted to have a skill that I could use within that system to advocate for change."

She chose to attend the State University of New York, Brooklyn, in order to be in a large urban setting where the social issues that mattered most to her intersected.

"The field of gynecological oncology came after getting exposed to medicine and realizing that it's a field where you meet a patient and you take care of that person for the rest of their life," she offers. "It's a really deep patient-doctor relationship, the kind of relationship that doesn't exist in a lot of other specialties within medicine."

It wasn't until her residency at New York University Medical Center that the seeds for the band would be planted. "When I was in medical school, I wrote a lot of music," she explains. "There's something about the science and the rigidity of the schedule that when I had free time, I was much more creative. It was like a balance."

The opportunity to put that creativity to use came during the Society for Gynecologic Oncology's annual conference in 2008, when one of the organizers decided it would be funny to put together a rock show. N.E.D. came together quickly, with the six members meeting for the first time in a Tampa hotel lobby before learning 20 cover songs to perform in front of 2,000 people. It was planned as a one-time lark, but that's not what happened.

The band started writing its own material, blending loping ballads and crunchy, arena-ready choruses. The group – which also includes Drs. John F. Boggess and John T. Soper from North Carolina, Nimesh P. Nagarsheth from New York, William R. "Rusty" Robinson from New Orleans and William E. Winter III from Portland, Ore. – then began playing shows across the country and currently is working on its third album.

While the music tackles universal themes of love and loss, the motivation is more pointed. "We play around the country and do concerts, raising awareness about gynecologic cancer and trying to help build a survivor

Mayer Hope: Continued on next page



Photo by George Stransky, MD

Ari Jazz Mayer Hope joins her mom on stage at the Beartooth Theatrepub in Anchorage, where N.E.D. was entertaining at a Let Every Woman Know event last year. Behind the pair is N.E.D. drummer Nimesh P. Nagarsheth, MD.



Photo by George Stransky, MD

Cancer survivors join Dr. Mayer Hope and N.E.D. at a Let Every Woman Know concert in 2013.

movement,” Dr. Mayer Hope explains, “a movement of education and awareness around these issues.”

The band’s profile grew even more, thanks to a 2013 documentary called “No Evidence of Disease,” which chronicles the band’s efforts to raise awareness of gynecologic cancers, offering peeks into the lives of these physicians and their patients and illustrating how the band’s success exists well beyond the measures of album sales or radio play. The first album includes descriptions of GYN cancer symptoms in the liner notes. During the concerts, the band invites cancer survivors onstage. The survivors carry cardboard signs describing the diseases that all too often go unnoticed for too long. They flip over the signs to offer messages of hope.

“The band has been transformative to all of us,” Dr. Mayer Hope says. “It’s been inspirational and helped us maintain our energy and excitement about what we do every day.”

In the course of filming the documentary, Dr. Mayer Hope left New York. Before that, she had worked for three weeks during her last rotation in medical school in Southeast Alaska. “It was absolutely amazing and beautiful and so different than the experience I was having in medical school, and I realized, ‘Holy smokes, what an amazing place to be a health care provider,’” she says. That image of the state never left her. In 2010 she moved to Anchorage, where she lives with her 7-year-old daughter, Ari Jazz Mayer Hope.

Dr. Mayer Hope initially relocated to Alaska to work with Ruth Higdon, MD, at the time the only gynecologic oncologist in the state. Three months after the move, Dr. Higdon left Alaska, and after only a few months removed from her fellowship training, Dr. Mayer Hope became the only gynecologic oncologist in a state that’s bigger than all but 18 countries in the world.

“That was a huge challenge, completely humbling, frightening and also a tremendous honor,” she says. But during her trial by fire, she found a medical community she could lean on.

Joanie Mayer Hope, MD



Age: 46

Residence:

Anchorage

Family: daughter, Ari Jazz, 7

Specialties:

Obstetrics/
Gynecology,
Gynecologic
Oncology

Practice location: Alaska Women’s Cancer Care, 3851 Piper Steet, Suite U264, Anchorage 99508

Alaska resident since: 2010

Moved to Alaska from: New York, N.Y.

Education and training: MD, State University of New York, Brooklyn; Residency, Obstetrics and Gynecology, and Fellowship, Gynecologic Oncology, New York University Medical Center

Specialty board certifications: American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology – Obstetrics and Gynecology, Gynecologic Oncology

Miscellany: Director of Gynecologic Oncology at Providence Alaska Cancer Center and the Alaska Native Medical Center; lead singer, guitarist with N.E.D.

“Every single one of the doctors who interface with me on some level, whether it was the OB/GYNs or colorectal surgeons or the medical oncologists, all have been phenomenally supportive. There’s a really sophisticated, excellent medical community in Alaska, and that has made it a completely doable challenge.”

Four years later Dr. Mayer Hope is joined at her Alaska Women’s Cancer Care practice by gynecologic oncologist Melissa Hardesty, MD, while their dozen-person team continues to serve the entire state.

“My goal is always that Alaska has state-of-the-art, accessible, excellent cancer care, and that no women will need to leave the state of Alaska for cancer care for any reason – unless because of family access or some other reason that you would want to go to the Lower 48, but it’s not going to be because we can’t provide her with the best care possible,” Dr. Mayer Hope says. “It’s been a career and a calling.”

Of course, meeting those goals presents its own set of unique challenges.

“Anchorage is sort of the tertiary care center for a very large geographic area with a sparse population,” she notes. “Part of it is balancing bringing people to you and helping them get the care as close to their own location as you can. That’s very different from being in a large urban center where you have a lot of choices of who you go to.”

But as health care changes take hold across the country, Dr. Mayer Hope sees Alaska in an enviable position of being able to survey what’s working best in the Lower 48.

“I think that in some ways Alaska is insulated from some of the things that are happening in the Lower 48,” she says. “In some ways we’re not, and in some ways there’s a more delayed impact.”

Meanwhile, Dr. Mayer Hope is still able to tap into her creative side to



Photo courtesy of Sierra Winegarner

Mixing fun with a cause at the National Race to End Women’s Cancer are, from left, Tess Ely, Dr. Mayer Hope, Mary Rita Ely and Sierra Winegarner.

advocate for social change. When one of her patients asked about bringing N.E.D. to Alaska last year, there was no way it was going to be just another show. “I said ‘OK, let’s bring the band up, but let’s not just bring the band up – let’s make it an event that’s going to help Alaska,’” she says.

The idea alone of booking the band was enough to raise \$120,000, and that success led to the birth of the nonprofit organization Let Every Woman Know.

That organization has spawned programs such as the EXTRA-TOUGHS (Extraordinary Transformation Towards Gynecologic Health and Survivorship), a 12-week weight-loss and exercise program for women’s cancer

survivors with a body mass index of more than 30. In September the nonprofit hosts the Alyeska Climbathon, a GYN cancer awareness event that raised more than \$48,000 last year.

“The existence of the band inspired people to want to make an event, and that event grew into something that is now an entire organization that has programs statewide, educational efforts, and is doing great things every day for women in the state of Alaska,” Dr. Mayer Hope says.

“The band is a spark that lights a fire that leads to an explosion that’s going to create a gynecologic cancer awareness movement in this country.”

Matt Sullivan is a freelance writer.