



Northern Exposure... A Close Encounter with the Canadian Healthcare System

Brendan Seaton

Brendan Seaton is the President of ITAC Health in Toronto, Ontario.

What do motorcycle riding and health care have in common? They are both inherently risky activities... as I learned some 300 kilometers north of the Arctic Circle.

Riding the Dempster Highway to the Arctic Circle and on to Inuvik in the Northwest Territories is a popular “bucket list” experience for middle-aged guys with motorcycles. The 750-kilometer gravel highway is one of the worst roads in the country, but it takes you through some of the most spectacular scenery that Canada has to offer. Making it to the Arctic Circle gives you unique bragging rights amongst your fellow motorcyclists (Ladies... its juvenile I know... but the guys will understand).

I reached the Arctic Circle crossing, my bucket list goal, on July 4th, 2010. On July 5th I set out on the last leg (no pun intended) of the trip, 370 kilometers north to Inuvik, the most northerly point you can reach in Canada by road.

About 70 kilometers south of Inuvik I hit a patch of deep soft gravel. For ten seconds everything went very wrong. The back end started to fishtail. The bike went into an uncontrollable wobble. In a reflex reaction my left leg went out to break the fall. My foot caught the ground while the bike was spinning. I felt each of the bones in my lower leg snap in turn. Then everything came to a stop. I was able to hit the engine kill switch. There was an eerie arctic silence. I was alone.

While for the first ten seconds everything went wrong, for the next 5 days everything went very right thanks to risk management (OK... I'm a risk management consultant – bias declared) and the Canadian healthcare system. My mishap wasn't unique. While most motorcyclists make it safely up the Dempster and back, a statistically significant number wipe out on the gravel doing damage to themselves and their machines. Before embarking on my trip I had researched the Dempster extensively, made sure that my bike had been properly modified and that I had the appropriate gear.

I ended up under my bike but I wasn't pinned thanks to the crash bars and high strength panniers that kept the bike up off my leg. My ankle was broken, but I didn't have a bruise

or a scratch on any other part of my body because of my armored motorcycle jacket and pants. My helmet protected my head from injury.

Knowing that I was riding on one of the most remote roads in the country, I had brought a satellite phone in case of emergencies. When I entered the Yukon I talked to an RCMP constable who gave me the telephone number of the RCMP communications centre in Whitehorse, which I wrote down and kept with the satellite phone. Perhaps most important I had obtained out-of-province extended health travel insurance that included air evacuation. As it turned out, every measure I put in place to minimize the impact of an accident was employed in this incident.

I also took measures to reduce the likelihood of a crash. Before leaving Toronto I had a special brace installed on the front fork of the bike to minimize the effect of bad road conditions. In Whitehorse I had special knobby enduro tires mounted on the bike to better grip the gravel road. I was going at a moderate speed, probably around 60 or 70 kilometers an hour. Unfortunately, the most important measure to reduce the likelihood of a crash was a special adventure riding training course for off road and poor road conditions. I had enrolled in such a course before my trip, but it was cancelled due to low enrollment. Who knows... with the proper training I might have avoided this accident altogether.

I did take some calculated risks. I went alone because I like to set my own pace and stop frequently to take pictures. Traveling in a group might have been less risky, but I chose to trade safety for independence. I also knew that at this time of year there is some traffic on the Dempster. Other riders along the way assured me that if you go down, you could count on another vehicle coming by in 15 or 20 minutes.

So off I went in full knowledge of the risks, having implemented whatever measures I could to mitigate those risks.

The second part of this story involves the Canadian healthcare system, and more specifically, the Northwest Territories health care system. It also involves the goodness of

strangers who were willing to stop and help. We tend to rag on about the inadequacies of healthcare in this country, how inefficient and expensive it is, the unreasonable wait times. I must say that during my experience in the arctic, as well as experiences with family members in other parts of Canada, the system worked brilliantly.

Yes, like everyone else I have waited for hours in hospital emergency rooms. But whenever immediate treatment was required, it was there. The triage system employed by hospitals in Canada ensures that those who need treatment the most get it first. Yes, mistakes are made. It's inevitable in such a complex environment. This is not to excuse long wait times or errors. We must work to minimize or eliminate them. But we need to keep the problems in perspective and acknowledge the excellent work of our healthcare professionals and institutions.

Lying in the middle of the road, I got out the satellite phone and called the RCMP communications centre in Whitehorse. They quickly patched me through to the RCMP detachment in Inuvik. From my GPS I was able to give them my exact coordinates. They immediately dispatched a cruiser and ambulance. In the meantime, a gentleman in a camper van from Washington State and a couple on their way home to Inuvik stopped to help. They got the bike and me to the side of the road. The gentleman from Washington stayed with me while I waited for emergency services. The RCMP arrived after about 40



minutes; the ambulance 5 minutes later.

I was transported to the Regional Hospital in Inuvik. They X-rayed my leg and using the new picture archiving and communications system (PACS) installed last year, sent the images to the orthopedic surgeon in Yellowknife. In a funny coincidence, I had conducted the Privacy Impact Assessment on that DI/PACS system before it went live. I knew that my privacy rights were going to be well protected, but I must admit that while lying in the middle of the Dempster Highway with a badly broken leg, privacy was the furthest thing from my mind. I would have gladly lit up the sky with my personal health information if I thought it would have gotten the ambulance there 5 minutes sooner. The incident certainly put privacy in perspective for me.

I got to see the technology and how health professionals use it in real-time. They decided the breaks were bad enough to airlift me by MEDEVAC to Yellowknife. I was put under while the bones in my leg were set and put in a temporary cast for transport. I was in and out of Inuvik in just over 8 hours. It would have been even quicker but the air ambulance crew had a more urgent case to fly-in from Tuktoyaktuk.

At both Inuvik Regional and Stanton Territorial Hospitals I received first class care from doctors and nurses who were skilled,

professional and had good senses of humor. It was the same for the police, ambulance attendants and technicians who looked after me.

Two days after surgery I was flying home executive class courtesy of my insurance company (yes... there is a place for private insurance in Canadian health care. The air ambulance alone cost almost \$17K – thank you RBC insurance).

So there I was... broken.... at the edge of the known universe... and the Canadian and Northwest Territories health care systems came through. Excellent people, excellent facilities and excellent technologies.

And what happened to my bike and stuff some 7000 kilometers from home? I was headed to a hotel in Inuvik called the Arctic Chalet. When the proprietor learned that I had been in an accident, she came to the hospital to see me, but I had already been airlifted to Yellowknife. She tracked down my wife in Toronto and offered to help in any way she could. She and her husband made all the arrangements to get my bike, gear and luggage shipped home. It's unquestionably the best place I "never" stayed.

Although I have been working with health information technologies for more than 30 years, this was my first personal experience with eHealth and the benefits it provides for improved health care. I can now personally

attest to the value of eHealth and to the use of advanced information and communications technologies.

As I stated at the beginning, motorcycle riding and health care are inherently risky activities. When things go wrong they can result in serious injury and even death. But when things go right, they result in experiences that enhance the enjoyment and satisfaction of life and make the risks well worth taking. The key is to manage the risks and to be proactive in realizing the benefits that life, motorcycling and a first class healthcare system provide.

So what are the lessons? eHealth works; the Canadian health care system works; and Canadians are the kindest people on the planet (well, Canadians and a certain gentleman from Washington State who drives a camper van)!

Oh.... And as an added benefit, I no longer have to check the weather channel in the morning to see if it's going to rain ;-)

With special thanks to NWT Health CIO Michele Herriot who provided much needed moral and material support while I was in hospital in Yellowknife; to the Government of the NWT and Canada Health Infoway who invested in the DIIPACS system that was so integral to my treatment and care; and to Agfa Healthcare who helped me format the X-rays for this article.

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ITAC HEALTH OFFICE

801, 5090 Explorer Drive
Mississauga, ON L4W 4T

STAFF

President

Brendan Seaton
Tel: 905.602.8345 Ext 242
eMail: bseaton@itac.ca

Executive Director

Elaine Huesing
Tel: 780.489.4574
eMail: ehuesing@itac.ca