

STEVE BREATHOUR MB BS – AN ORAL HISTORY

**Conducted by Edith Swift
Nuggets Crossing, Jindabyne - March 17th, 2017**



Dr Steve Breathour, Jindabyne (2017)

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Conducted by Edith Swift, Nuggets Crossing Surgery, Jindabyne 2627

The date is March 17th 2017, and I am Edie Swift. I am interviewing Doctor Steve Breathour for Thredbo Historical Society about his practice in Jindabyne in NSW, and his involvement in the Ski Patrol in Thredbo, and other roles he has done and he is outstanding in the work he has done.

When you first came to Thredbo to practice, you also joined Thredbo Ski Patrol.

I started in Thredbo in 1983 working for the doctors that had the practice at the time, Andrew Gibson and Michael Cameron. I had been skiing since 1961 and so I knew the mountains fairly well. I had a cousin out the back of Adaminaby and we used to come down in school holidays and spend time in the bush, and it was always just fantastic. I always threatened to come and work as a doctor.

I had a bit of free time so I thought I would give it a try and finally do it. I dropped in over Easter in 1983 and these guys had just taken over the Thredbo practice and they were looking for a doctor to run it. So it worked out quite nicely. I arrived in June 1983 and it all went from there. Before me there were a couple of seasons when there was one doctor, but in years before that there was a doctor for two weeks at a time.

It was sort of unsatisfactory because you have got to have a fair bit of trauma training to be able to work that sort of surgery and whilst the injuries are the same that you can get anywhere, it is the sheer volume of things that you have got to be good at – heads, shoulders, damaged knees - you have got to know what you are doing, to be able to figure it out properly. It was all a bit primitive back in those days.

What year was that?

1983. We had an X-ray facility which was quite good, but gosh we used to sterilize instruments in a pot of boiling water, which is totally inadequate nowadays, quite obviously. There was the ski patrol on the June opening long weekend and when they just carried this patient in - six of them carrying someone in on a stretcher and dumped her on the floor - they didn't dump her on the floor – they put her on the floor on the side and I thought "What do we do now? How do we get her off the floor and put her on a bed? From that, and I know it sounds silly, but we got a trolley made up so we could get the stretcher off the ski lift, and one patroller could wheel the trolley in and could slide the patient across on to a bed. Little things like that, and it went on from there.

George Freuden was in charge of the Thredbo Ski Patrol in those days and he basically wanted me to start training the ski patrollers in first aid through the Australian Ski Patrol Association or ASPA, as we call it. That summer we did a first aid course at Westmead Hospital. Nick Crombie was another doctor involved. He was the medical director of the ski patrol at the time so we got together and started putting lecture notes together, which had never before happened. We put a slightly different ski patrol course together and formalised it more and more. So that was it. I turned up in for seventeen weeks in June, 1983 and I haven't left.

How is it different in what you do? Do you use the sleds anymore?

The ski patrol has grown as time has gone on. Yes, they still use the same akjas. The equipment is much better. But a lot of the stuff, you know, hasn't changed that much I suppose. In 1983 hypothermia was a major problem. I remember getting 70 kids once from the Sport and Recreation Camp – a blizzard suddenly came in and they brought them all in to the surgery we only had four beds so we had kids on the floor everywhere, just trying to warm them up. We had a problem with the kind of clothing they wore.

Round about 1983, '84, we got stuck into Sport and Recreation about it and they made sure that the clothing was better. We hardly see hypothermia anymore. Ski clothing has improved. In those days of course, the bindings weren't as good. The injuries were more broken legs and ankles, even though the boots were plastic. Within a short space of time, the bindings improved and we stopped breaking legs to a large degree and started rupturing knees more and more.

Why was that?

Just the way the bindings work and the way the boots and bindings work together.

The higher boots now – are they a problem?

No, the higher boots were way back in the late 1970s to the mid '80s, although I have seen a few lately and they are coming back a little bit. With a higher boot, if you sit back a bit, the back of the boot pushes the shin forward and the anterior cruciate ligament can give way. You see lots of people with a ruptured anterior cruciate that don't even fall.

Are the newer skis helping anything?

I don't think they are changing anything. When they first came out, they had big side cuts and back in the late '90s I think, when they first came in we thought we would see an increase in anterior cruciate ligament tears but then they dropped the side cut off a fair bit and I don't think things have changed much since then.

Snowboarding was another big change and when they first came in, the snowboarders were devils. They weren't appreciated anywhere. Snowboarding is an easier sport to get on with compared to skiing. You used to stand up with your hands over your head and that would be the size of your ski. But with snowboarders, they could ride the full mountain within two or three days. There was a fair bit of conflict at first but snowboarding has saved the ski industry. That is where all the increases have come from over the past decade.

Having spent such a considerable time practicing medicine in the Snowies, what would you consider the major changes and advances in patient care since the days of Dr John Shedden.

Doctor Shedden was back a bit, around about 1979 or '80 when he died. Geoffrey Cocker took over then and Geoff is still practicing down in Berridale. What has changed? The constancy of doctors - the Perisher practice and Thredbo practice are both run by doctors in this practice. We are open in summer a lot more especially in Thredbo. There is not too much in Perisher because it is closed outside the ski season.

Yes, it is a better practice in so far as you have the same doctor year round. In Thredbo they have got a surgery opening in summer which didn't have happen before

my time, and before it was opening only one day a week. Now we are open most weekends and all school holidays.

Where are the surgeries?

In Jindabyne and in Thredbo. The surgery at Thredbo is at the bottom of the Kosciuszko Chairlift. These days the mountain biking is so big that you need to be open.

In Perisher, do you have a surgery there during the ski season?

In Perisher, the surgery is run by Doctor Karen Ratana and that is in the Ski Tube building. People from Blue Cow are brought down in the train and then the lift up into the surgery, but otherwise they just come across from the car park.

And then from there into which hospitals do they go?

It depends on whether they need to go to hospital. In the old days if someone broke their arm they went off to hospital, but now days we straighten arms, dislocated shoulders, we reduce the dislocated hips, straighten out broken legs. We tend to only send people to hospital who are badly injured, like multiple traumas or where they can't look after themselves, like a fractured pelvis, two broken legs and things like that. Most broken legs we send to hospital because the dangers to life that can develop from a long bone fracture. But most injuries we look after.

The nearest hospital that can do all that stuff, is Canberra Hospital. From Thredbo it is 210 kilometres away and about the same for Perisher. In winter it varies. You might spend three or four days without sending anyone to hospital and then you might have a day when you send six. It depends on the severity of the injury and how well we are able to look after it.

Is there a doctor on each ski patrol?

No. Well, there may be doctors on ski patrol. The doctor is at the base of the ski patrol. The ski patrols drag everyone down to the doctor.

Do they use the sleds anymore or do they use skidoos?

They use skidoos, but if people can't sit up, they can't be on the back of skidoos, but yes they use the sleds – the akjas they call them – the Austrian versions. There are a few one-man, but generally two-man operation things. There are a few single-man sleds in Perisher. Thredbo tends to use the akjas all the time or skidoos to take them to a chairlift to get them down. it depends on what is wrong.

Now the ASPA?

That is the Australian Ski Patrol Association.

It will come up some time during the interview and I do not wish to imply that there is a problem in that regard. Next year in the ASPA interview when Jerry Intends to focus more specifically on the medical protocols and their implementation when the ASPA was founded and the part you played in that, Jerry is saying that if you wanted to go over that.

Well as I mentioned, George Freuden was ski patrolling in Thredbo at the time and he invited me to ASPA when there was a meeting between the Victorian ski patrols and the NSW ski patrols and that was held at the Queanbeyan Leagues Club around about December 1983, where we formed the education committee of ASPA. That was designed to put the syllabus together and to standardise training for the ski patrols in the Australian resorts.

There were four doctors involved and a couple of senior ski patrollers on that committee. From that we put a together a manual. It took about three or four years. The manual was eventually published in 1988 and the manual was mainly an extension of what we put together. We started running a course in Victoria, a course in Sydney and then we started running one in the mountains and then another one in the mountains. It all just went from there.

Back in those days in the mid-80s the ski patroller legally, needed only to have a St John's First Aid or a Red Cross First Aid Certificate. The ASPA course was designed with the mountains in mind and the amount of equipment the ski patrollers were starting to use. Simple things like an air splint and how to put it on (those first aid courses didn't teach that), and then the use of pain relief –penthrane or entonox, and how to use them safely, and how to apply the traction splint which is a complicated device used to stabilise fractured femurs and sometimes fractured tibias.

Back then MAST trousers were around. They were used to treat shock and now have rightly run out of favour. That sort of thing was being used, but back then, the ski patrol was keeping up to date and trying new things. Things like a hypothermia kit and where we could heat up people's core. But I don't think we ever used it in anger, but we knew we were able to.

Is that all over Australia?

ASPA is a voluntary organisation and the resorts voluntarily belong to it, so yes, in all Australia ski resorts. I have run first aid courses in Tasmania. The Victorian guys do Victoria and the NSW fellows do NSW, but I got out of it about 15 years ago. I thought it was time for other people to take it on and come up with fresh ideas. You go stale after a while

Do the ski fields also have an impact on ski patrol, like in training them and do they also have courses?

Yes, they are still doing courses with ASPA and by other people. That is still happening. I like to think that we, Nick Crombie who was the medical director of the Thredbo patrol, Gary Grant, Maurice Stewartson and the Victorian guys set it up properly. When Workcover started in this country, the first aid courses all had to be approved and we got authorised very quickly. We had been running first aid courses, but we only concentrated on the mountains and the ski patrol.

Would you like to add anything else? You have covered it so beautifully.

Like any organisation, the four of us that were involved from NSW, we are still friends, we stayed together doing it for a long time and I said wanted to go as I thought I was getting stale. The others have gradually left as well and other people have moved in. It is good the way things have evolved- they are much better at doing what we used to do.

These days with computers – it was all done by hand in my day. People put in a lot of their time in coming to train.

The really good thing about it was that it got the patrols from the different resorts to get together and talk. The exchange of ideas was always really good because of the mixing during the courses. Before then people from Perisher were saying “people from Thredbo were from the dark side” and Thredbo people were saying the same thing about Perisher.

Now everyone one knows everyone else and there is a good exchange of ideas. It still happens, but now the patrollers don’t regard the resorts as being in isolation. They are part of NSW skiing and you want Perisher strong and you want Thredbo strong, and you want strong NSW and everyone is happy.

So that was a really good thing from making ASPA and getting the resorts wanting to be part of it.

Now who were those four people who went in with you?

Gary Grant, he was the captain of Perisher patrol. Nick Crombie was a doctor – he worked in the ski patrol. I was the doctor in Thredbo, Maurice Stewartson was another ski patroller in Thredbo. We put it all into practice in 1983, and we started putting the manual together because there was no first aid manual. That was actually published in 1988 in the Bi-Centennial Year in Australia. In the meantime I had taken over the Thredbo surgery in my own right in 1986. In 1985 I was a trainee with the Thredbo Ski Patrol and spent about 10 weeks down there with the patrol, so I was able to write the manual from the patroller’s side, not the doctor’s side. But when I took over the surgery, I had to give away because it was something you couldn’t do both of.

Is there anything else you would like to say?

About ASPA?

Anything for the interview, because I think we have done quite a bit. Unless you want to say anything else, I think we will conclude.

Well I was there from 1983 to now. All the things that happened in the landslide and a lot of my friends died, you know that took a long, long time to get over it and I am not sure that everyone that was there has. We have all changed. I look back on early 1997 and we have all changed. People coped. Yes that was a difficult time – it took about five years. I moved up to Perisher in 2002. I sold Thredbo in 2011 to Michael Williamson who has got it now – he had worked for me as a doctor since about 2003 and then in 2014 I sold Perisher to Karen who has been working for me since 2005, and I am just doing Jindabyne now.

Well thank you so much. I really appreciate it. Are you happy to have this transcribed?

Yes

Thank you very much.

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This is an agreement between the **INTERVIEWEE** and the **Thredbo Historical Society Incorporated** (please fill in your details):

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