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Autor: Hutter, Miriam / Burren, Thomas
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"I'm part of a great team"

Thomas Burren has been flying with Rega on repatriation flights as a nurse for 14 years. He has often brought the Swiss abroad home, too. He loves his work even though he is constantly faced with difficult situations.

Interview by Miriam Hutter

«*SWISS REVIEW*»: Before joining Rega, you spent a long time working in intensive care units at various hospitals. How does working on Rega planes differ from being in a hospital?

THOMAS BURREN: First of all, it is not just about providing medical care; I also have to know a great deal about flying conditions. I went on a supplementary 14-day training course all about that when I started. Secondly, I work much more independently. It is just the doctor and I. We don't have a large team around us. You can't quickly run a special test; you have to work with what you have.

So, what facilities are available on the Rega jets?

We can transport four patients lying down in an aircraft. We have a kind of mini intensive care unit for two of them with respirators, monitoring systems and infusion pumps. Medicines and supplies are limited, of course. When something runs out, there is no replacement. This requires very careful, forward planning.

What is a typical mission like?

We are on stand-by at home and must be ready for take-off within two hours of an emergency call. My job up to the point of take-off is to organise provisions, check the main systems and medicines and ensure all the material required is available. After a briefing with the doctor, pilots and operations management, we carry out the final checks and then depart.



Thomas Burren is 47 years of age and has found his dream job as an intensive care professional with Rega. He is married and has two teenage children.

Is the patient waiting for you at the destination airport?

No, when we arrive an ambulance is normally waiting for us in which we then collect the patient from the hospital. We take medicines and equipment with us because we take over supervision and care of the patient as soon as we reach him. When we arrive at our final destination, the doctor and I accompany the patient to the hospital by ambulance where we hand him over to the medical team responsible there.

And is the mission then complete?

Just the medical part. We then often have to fly home. Not every patient is taken to Zurich. We then tidy up so that the jet is ready for the next mission. Our rest time begins after that. This depends on the length of the mission, but normally lasts at least twelve hours.

Are there very special moments in your job?

Every time you reach a patient is a special moment. People are usually really happy to see us when we walk into the room. They are often not aware of what is wrong with them due to the language barrier. We speak to them in their mother tongue, explain their condition to them and they soon feel they are in good hands.

Difficult situations must surely arise.

I find it very hard when red tape puts obstacles in our way. We sometimes get to an airport in the ambulance with the patient in an unstable condition requiring artificial respiration, perhaps on an intravenous drip or receiving blood transfusions, and we have to wait at customs with him for an hour. This can endanger the patient's life. Such arbitrariness is hard to accept. The journeys to reach the patients are sometimes also physically demanding, such as when we have to travel through the desert for hours. And, of course, I am constantly confronted with tragedy – deaths or an accident affecting an entire family. As we are often the first people the patients can talk to, we feel their emotions particularly strongly on the flight home. Missions involving children obviously always affect you deeply.

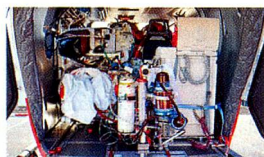
What does working for Rega mean to you?

I see it as a dream job and something I wanted to do for a long time. I can work independently and belong to a fantastic team. I have never come across such highly motivated people as at Rega. People at all levels, whether in the medical section or elsewhere, feel a great sense of responsibility for our mission of saving lives.



1997
The operations centre, rescue jets, maintenance services and

administration are all relocated to the new Rega Center at Zurich airport. The new Rega emer-



gency number 1414 is adopted for air rescue services in Switzerland.

2009
A "life box" – a compact, mobile heart-lung machine – is deployed for the first time aboard Rega helicopters and air ambulance jets. It is successfully used



to support a patient on a transatlantic flight in 2010, which is a world first.

2012
On 16 March, after a coach accident in Valais, Rega deploys its three air ambulance jets to transport 14 patients and their families from Sion to Brussels in six flights. This is the first time that all Rega's air ambulance planes have been used together in the same mission.