

TRAVEL

Clinic helps travelers deal with dangerous world

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

Dr. Susan Knoll says that when she lectures on travel her colleagues at Farmington's Botsford Hospital chuckle.

"I'm the most conservative person in the world," said Knoll, of Botsford's Department of Infectious Disease. "I give lectures on travel and I cannot imagine anyone going anywhere. It's an 'exciting' world out there."

Perhaps Knoll of Farmington Hills can be forgiven her provincialism. She's an expert on what dangers lurk when people travel. She advises international travelers through Botsford's "Passport to Health: International Travel Health Program."

Opened in September of 1996, Passport to Health prepares the international traveler for the many health hazards they might encounter, especially in third world countries.

"The program is designed to prepare, inform and immunize travelers going overseas, especially to Africa, South America and Asia," Knoll said.

The Passport to Health program focuses on three aspects for travelers:

- pre-trip planning
- counseling that covers precautions and immunizations
- a post-trip follow-up visit that can include medical tests and treatment if necessary.

"We pride ourselves on providing quick care. A lot of programs you have to wait weeks," Knoll said. "But you have to call enough in advance to make the immunizations effective."

Knoll recommends calling within one month of a trip. The process includes doing a past medical history, a study of medications and making recommendations specific to the areas they're visiting. Immunizations often have to be spaced out to avoid unfavorable drug interaction and to save patients from discomfort.

"We have a lot of travelers going to Asia, Africa and South America," Knoll said. "We give recommendations on food and beverages, precautions people should take when they're there."

In addition to the ubiquitous "traveler's diarrhea," other health concerns include malaria, Hepatitis A and B, dysentery and even such rare but serious diseases as yellow fever and ebola.



STAFF PHOTO BY JAYAN MITCHELL

Travel doctor: Dr. Susan Knoll of Botsford Hospital's Passport to Health advises that it can be a dangerous world out there.

Eating and drinking in a foreign country is a major source of problems for travelers because sanitary regulations are not as stringent in other parts of the world. Knoll warns against drinking the water or eating fresh fruits unless a traveler peels it (see the list of travel do's and don'ts).

Knoll said malaria is widespread. The degree and extent varies from country to country. She said big cities and higher elevations usually present less of a problem. But she advises travelers on what medicines to take, how to dress and advises using mosquito netting when sleeping.

Recently the Hepatitis Foundation has been running a regular ad in the New York Times warning against the prevalence

of Hepatitis A and urging travelers to get protection.

"We can protect against it very well," Knoll said. "Formerly, immunizations only protected for six months or so, now they protect for life."

Another problem for travelers is that most company insurance programs do not cover illness outside of the United States. Passport to Health advises travelers to purchase a rider to their insurance or a short term special travelers insurance policy.

In addition to warning against the dangers of drinking the water in foreign countries, Knoll also warns about swimming in foreign waters.

"Snorkeling and scuba diving are usually done in ocean water and are not a big problem, but shallow river waters are often

used to defecate and throw wastes," she said.

She also warns against swimming in still or stagnant water.

But disease is not the only problem. Knoll said the number one killer for foreign travelers is automobile accidents and the clinic provides precautions on driving as well. It also updates travelers on the political conditions in the country they are visiting.

Many area companies, especially the auto companies, are making use of travel clinics to advise their employees who will be stationed in foreign countries for up to several years.

"We also got many church mission groups. They contact other travel clinics and use us because of the price," Knoll said.

Passport to Health
Trip Tips:

■ Before you leave check your insurance policy to make sure you're covered. If you aren't covered consider purchasing a short-term health insurance policy designed for travelers.

■ If you're traveling with pre-existing medical problems, it's a good idea not only to carry a letter from your physician describing your condition but a list of prescription medicines you take (with their generic names). Wear a medical alert bracelet if you have allergies or unique medical problems.

■ Always travel with your prescriptions in their original, labeled containers and always keep them with you.

■ Keep your doctor's fax number handy.

■ To make sure you're not violating the drug laws in the countries in which you're traveling, check the country's embassy or consulate before leaving the United States.

■ Food do's and don'ts:

Do only drink beverages made with boiled water (such as tea and coffee); canned or bottled carbonated beverages, such as bottled water and soft drinks; and beer and wine.

Do listen when folks say, "Don't drink the water," and remember that includes ice.

Do drink from a beverage can or bottle before you drink from a container that may have been contaminated. Always

wipe clean wet cans or bottles before drinking from them.

Don't brush your teeth with tap water.

Don't eat salads (or any uncooked vegetable), milk or milk product (such as cheese) or fruit peeled by someone other than you. Eat only cooked food that is still hot and fruit you peeled yourself. Also, avoid undercooked and raw meat, fish and shellfish. Remember, all raw foods should be viewed as possibly contaminated.

Don't bring back perishable seafood from a trip.

■ Avoid swimming in contaminated water. Only pools that contain chlorinated water are safe. Avoid stagnant water. Freshwater streams may be contaminated and contain the small hosts of schistosomiasis, or warm dirty water may contain fatal primary amoebic meningoencephalitis.

■ In some urban areas, such as Mexico City, air pollution can be quite severe and even dangerous for the elderly and/or persons with pre-existing conditions such as high blood pressure, respiratory anemia or cardiac conditions. Also, high altitudes can cause altitude sickness.

■ Avoid the sun and plenty of sunscreen and/or sun blocker.

■ Sometimes an infection (viral, bacterial or parasitic) or a disease (for example, malaria) contracted abroad may not manifest itself for weeks, even months, after returning from international travel. See your doctor at the first signs of an illness.

Passport to Health provides its clients with a computer printout of recommendations, immunization records and updates on their destination.

Knoll said that when she completed training as a medical technician in microbiology in Erie, Pa., she decided to pursue her interest in medical school and did graduate work in infectious diseases.

While doing residency at Botsford Hospital, she met her husband, Darrell Vlachos, an emer-

gency room physician at the hospital. They have three children ages 1, 4 and 6.

Knoll admits that her pre-trip lectures can be frightening.

"One physician had a huge trip planned. He came in and I told him all I knew. Next thing, he changed his travel plans. I think he ended up going to Grand Cayman," she said.

But if you do decide to go, you become sick, Knoll said, "Come back and we'll take care of you."

GREAT ESCAPES

Great Escapes features various travel news items. Send news leads to Hugh Gallagher, assistant managing editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, or fax them to (313) 691-7279.

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our travel page. Call Hugh Gallagher at 734-953-2118, or fax him at 734-591-7279 or e-mail him at hgallagher@oe.homecomm.net.

NUB'S NOB CHALLENGE
World Cup slalom racing will be held at the 36th Annual Nub's Nob Open in Harbor Springs Saturday, March 14. The Mardi Gras Spring Fling will be held at the Nob on Saturday, March 21. For more information, call 1-800-SIX-NUBS.

CARNIVAL & CRAZY DAYS

WEEKEND
Boyne Mountain's Carnival, March 21-22, features live bands, a costume party and a Wet 'n' wild Slush Cup on Sunday. For information, call 1-800-GO-BOYNE.

BLUEBIRD FESTIVAL

The 14th annual Bluebird Festival & Wildlife Art Show is 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, March 14, and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday, March 15, on the campus of Jackson Community College, 2111 Emmons Road, Jackson. The fun includes guided walks to the bluebird habitat, art, food, storytellers and speakers. The festival is sponsored by the Dahlem Environmental Education Center, a nonprofit organization affiliated with Jackson Community College.

FOUR STAR RATING

The Ritz-Carlton, Dearborn has won a Mobil Four-Star Award from the 1998 Mobil Travel Guide. The hotel is among 406 dining and lodging establishments in North America

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