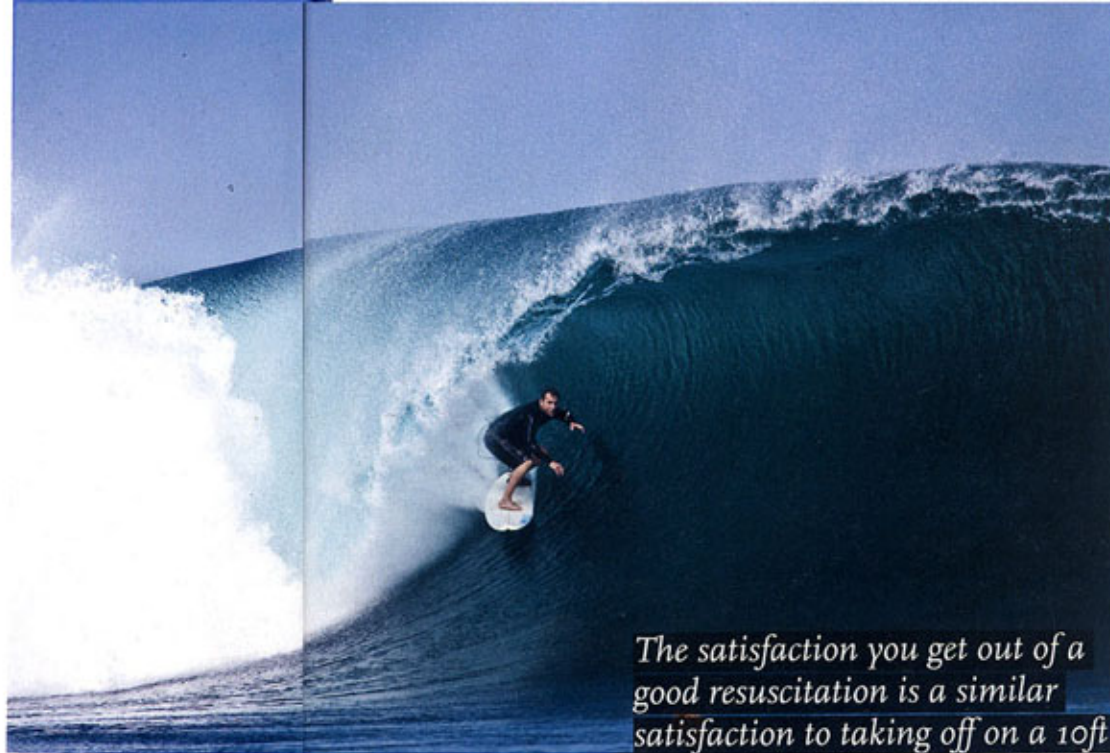




Left: Chapman left a promising pro surfing career to become a doctor. After many years as a doc-in-residence at G-Land, he founded the group Surfing Doctors, which aims to keep a medic in attendance at many of the world's popular, heavy waves.

Right: When he's not tending to the wounded Chapman enjoys checking G-Land's pulse.



The satisfaction you get out of a good resuscitation is a similar satisfaction to taking off on a 10ft wave and getting blasted out of a barrel. You walk away with a sense of achievement

Barrels + Bandages

INTERVIEW BY MIKE FROOD; PHOTOS BY ANDREW CHISHOLM

A few minutes with a healer and charger: Dr. Phil Chapman

The 'Surfing Doctors' are crowding the restaurant at Jojo's camp in G-Land. They're listening intently to South African-born, Australian-based Emergency Physician, Dr. Phil Chapman delivering a lecture on advanced life support in remote locations.

Enter stage left, dripping blood and water, a dishevelled Spanish surfer with half his ear hanging off and a gash above his eye. Someone needs to sort him out and Dr. Phil doesn't miss a beat. He evaluates the situation with a casual glance and directs a couple of the more junior doctors to attend to the Spaniard. For the patient, midway through the first annual Surfing Doctors Conference was a good time to get injured, and he'll be fine.

A couple of hours later the same crew of surf docs is out the back at 6ft Speedies. After a patient wait, Dr. Phil has priority as one of the

better sets rears up. With the same casual authority and cool confidence he drops into the throaty beast and with surgical precision proceeds to get shackled off his head.

This is a man of many talents but he's as humble, and also as loose, as the next man. Dr. Phil very nearly pursued a promising career as a pro surfer but made the leap to medicine at the last minute. Surfing remains his *raison d'être* but he's as passionate about saving lives as he is about the next swell. He's done plenty of time at remote surf spots and it was this that led him to establish Surfing Doctors – a mobile brigade of barrel-minded medics.

Chapman is the commander in the emergency room, a gentleman in the water and a larrikin at the bar. He's also a good bloke to get to know because he might just save your life when your next remote surf mission goes pear-shaped.

Where did the idea for Surfing Doctors come from?

It was something I'd always had in the back of my mind, but my two loves of surfing and medicine had never merged properly until '96, the year after my internship, when there was a spinal injury out at G-Land. They'd heard I'd been out there the year before and Jojo got hold of me and said, 'Look we'd really like your input. Would you like to come and stay for free and be the doctor in the camp?'

I've been there every year since '96; I was doing a month at a time and then started doing a roster to get other guys up there. As time went on I made a bit of a name for myself and got some interest from Tavarua. Two years ago when a guy broke his pelvis at G-Land, at the end of it all we were sitting back and going, 'shit that was heavy'. Then in the same month Dylan Longbottom's brother got injured and another guy died up in Asu.

So a few things sparked it off and inspired me to do it properly.

What hopes do you have for this organisation?

Well we've got a couple of goals, one of them being to roll with a couple of rosters in different surf camps. Surf camps are keen for our help – new ones that are still naive and old ones that need our back-up. Also, I want this to be a group that stands for something, to have the power to go worldwide. To help out with natural disasters, to pull together as specialists in what we do: work well in remote locations, be good at retrievals, good at resuscitation, good at speaking the local lingo and good at connecting – taking all those skills and putting them together without a military or NGO or United Nations mindset or whatever. With our own key agenda we can help out a lot of people around the world.

There's obviously a lot of interplay between surfing and medicine in your life ...

There's definitely a play-off there. The satisfaction you get out of a good resuscitation is a similar satisfaction to taking off on a 10ft wave and getting blasted out of a barrel. You walk away with a sense of achievement. And if things go badly, it's the same analogy: you get wiped out and rolled across the rocks and break your board ... or you're in the emergency room and things go badly. You walk away with the same mindset: 'Shit, pull up your socks, keep going'. But the adrenalin is always there, be it good or bad.

You said at the conference that being a surfer has made you a better doctor. How so?

The key thing is grace under pressure. You've got to take the surfer's approach to life into the emergency room. When the shit's

hitting the fan, and there's all sorts of chaos, just have that sense of: 'let's be cool and do our thing', you know – just like when you're caught inside at 10ft Shipsterns or something. That's what I'm looking for in this whole Surfing Doctors thing – people who, when there's trouble, they're cool, and when there's good times they go off, and when the shit really comes down, they stick together.

Speaking of Shipsterns; there's a pretty impressive shot on the Surf Docs website of you taking on the beast on your backhand. What's that all about?

It's an awesome wave, just a challenge. Having surfed some of

the heavier waves in Cape Town, when I moved to Tasmania I was looking for the juice. I met some of the local chargers and they were like, 'You're from Cape Town, you've got to surf Shipsterns!' I wasn't so sure. Being one of the only backhand guys to have a dig with them was a big challenge. I got flogged plenty of times but got some of the best backhand barrels I've ever had. Intense, massive, big backhand tubes. Surfing that place wasn't only an adrenalin rush but it was an endorphin rush, too. On the boat on our way home my whole body was tingling.

You've done your time at some pretty heavy surf spots, both as a

surfer and as a medic; you must have seen some pretty heavy shit go down?

I've seen a few near drownings, which have been heavy. Luckily most of them have had good outcomes. I've never seen a death out in the surf but I have seen deaths in the emergency room from surfing. Maybe the heaviest was that guy Robert who broke his pelvis out at G-Land. We were worried about his pelvis, his spine, organs, the whole works. We got on the phone to his insurance company to get the retrieval going but no one was interested! It's surreal. You're standing on the edge of the beach with a guy that's dying and some guy on the phone who flies rescue helicopters says he can't come today because he's booked with tourists. No one gives a fuck – the dollar comes first. We couldn't get anything done so we moved him to the camp and realised he was unstable and by the time it was dark we realised we needed to get him out of there, so we lobbed him in the back of a 4WD and got out of there. He could have died at any stage; the mortality rate from that injury is pretty high in a normal setting. He was one of the lucky ones.

So you go through an experience like that, how do you get out the next day and pull in? Does it ever put you off?

Not at all. After we escorted Robert back to Bali and he was ok it was all about getting back to G-Land and into the surf as soon as possible. The waves were that good. Robert had made a bad mistake and been unlucky, but that sort of thing only happens sporadically. You've just got to keep charging. Don't let fear creep in. I was really stoked with the whole outcome and never had any doubts on pulling in; it sort of made me want to go even harder. 🍌

You can find surf travel safety advice and learn more about Surfing Doctors at www.surfingdoctors.com

Mike Flood is a freelance writer and regular Indonesia traveller based out of Western Australia.