

Lung patients conquer Kilimanjaro

Gabriella Swerling
Northern Correspondent

Simon Ashton was sitting in his office in Merseyside when he received an unusual phone call from the Medical University of Vienna.

Could he organise an expedition to Mount Kilimanjaro within three months? Of course he could. Is a group of 24 people, plus 140 staff, possible? Yes, OK. Would it be a problem if the climbers were lung transplant patients, complete with their surgeons, doctors, psychologists and medical research equipment in tow? "We sat down and thought — can we really do this?," he recalled. "Then we said, 'Yes we can.'"

As the director of Kilimanjaro Climbing Company Ltd, Mr Ashton, 45, is accustomed to taking groups up Africa's highest peak. Yet despite the health risks and logistics involved in his latest brief, he set to work when Peter Jaksch, head of the university's lung transplant programme, explained that he wanted to pull off "a true miracle".

After training for six months before enduring a week of constant medical tests measuring spirometry (how well one can breathe) and freezing temperatures, eight lung transplant patients from across Europe climbed the 5,895-metre (19,341ft) Tanzanian mountain in June. Although they have chequered medical histories — ranging from cystic fibrosis to pulmonary hypertension — initial test results found they had better lungs than some of the doctors who made the ascent with them.

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His patients were from Hungary, Austria, Romania, Slovakia and Greece and ranged from 23 to 63 years old. Despite two of them having to drop out of the climb at 400m because of muscle weakness, the others only suffered mild altitude sickness. Dr Jaksch described the experience as “one of the highlights of my life” and is finalising the analysis. He hopes to publish his findings in an academic paper.

One of the patients who reached the summit was Helmut Steigersdorfer, who had a lung transplant in 2002 because of his cystic fibrosis. Despite



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“I always go to the mountains with my friends, and that feeling when you stand at the top and you can look around and see what you have done — that is the best feeling,” he said.

“Kilimanjaro was hard because it was very cold and dark. But we reached the summit at 6.30am and when the sun came out it was unbelievable. We were all crying.” He said of the results: “I feel like normal people, not sick people. I have no problems with the lungs, no problem with oxygen. I can do what normal people do.”

Another patient, Andreas Gappmayer, 45, of Salzburg, had a lung

transplant in 2002 because of his cystic fibrosis. “I knew I was fit with this and I’m good with my new lung,” he said, “but I would not have taken the risk to do this without the doctors. They checked us all the time.” He added: “It’s very exciting for me that I’m maybe the same as other people without a transplant.”

Mr Ashton said that the expedition was planned to the last detail. Permission was sought so that a generator for the medical equipment could be taken up the mountain. Tests were also conducted to see how altitude affected the patients. “The fact that those guys have had a second chance in life and then gone to the actual summit is amazing,” he added.

Dr Jaksch hopes to make the trip an annual event.

Prescription cheats pay back £23m

Ben Webster

A million fines were sent to people suspected of wrongly claiming free NHS prescriptions under a crackdown on a fraud that costs taxpayers up to £240 million a year.

The NHS clawed back £23 million in penalties and unpaid prescription charges last year, almost ten times as much as two years earlier.

Many patients falsely claim that they are entitled to free medicines to avoid the £8.60 charge for each item. They are only required to tick a box to receive the drugs free with no checks made at the chemist’s counter.

Community pharmacists in England dispensed 1.1 billion prescriptions costing £9.2 billion last year, *The Mail on Sunday* reported. Almost nine out of ten were handed out free, mainly for

children and those aged over 60 but also to people on low income.

Philip Dunne, the health minister, said: “Claiming a free prescription when you are not entitled to it puts pressure on NHS services and takes money away from where it is needed more.” The increased checks by the NHS had resulted in the amount recovered rising from £2.5 million to £23 million in two years.

“But there is far more to be done and we expect the amount the NHS recovers to keep increasing,” Mr Dunne said. “Those who are entitled to free prescriptions will not be affected and will continue to get them as normal.”

The Department of Health’s annual report says that 1.6 million penalty charge notices were issued between September 2014 and March this year, including a million in the year to

March. Another 700,000 fines have been issued since September 2014 to people suspected of making false claims for free NHS dental treatment.

Penalties are up to a maximum of £100 with a 50 per cent surcharge if the fine is not paid within a specified time. Persistent offenders can be prosecuted.

Carol Ann Joyce, 63, of north Wales, was jailed for six months in 2014 after travelling to different GP surgeries to obtain prescriptions of a painkiller to which she had become addicted. She claimed that she was living in temporary accommodation or a refuge.

A man was prosecuted after he spent 12 years registering himself and his wife with GPs around the country to get prescriptions for a painkiller. He would claim that they were on holiday and give a false address in a fraud that was said to have cost the NHS £31,520.

Ronnie Wood puts hair before chemotherapy

Ben Webster

Ronnie Wood told doctors he would rather keep his hair than have chemotherapy when cancer was discovered on his lung.

The Rolling Stones guitarist, 70, revealed that a lesion was found in May during a routine check-up for the band’s forthcoming tour. He had a five-hour operation to remove part of his lung.

The father of six, right, told *The Mail on Sunday*: “There was a week when everything hung in the balance and it could have been curtains, time to say goodbye.” Wood quit smoking last year, a

week before his third wife Sally, who is 31 years his junior, gave birth to twin girls. When told of the lesion by the band’s doctor, Richard Dawood, he said that if tests showed it had spread he would not have chemotherapy. “I wasn’t going to use that bayonet in my body,” he said. “This hair wasn’t going anywhere.” A week later he was told the cancer had not spread.



● Gold could be used to fight lung cancer, say scientists at Edinburgh University. Tiny flecks can increase the effectiveness of drugs in tumours without side effects. The research, published in the journal *Angewandte Chemie*, was carried out on a zebrafish.