

# the montanac

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*Dr. Megan Evans and her husband Jeff drive with a medical team across unpaved Mongolian roads en route to the first location where they will set up a makeshift clinic. The surroundings are open, vast, and beautiful – like Paradise Valley, only wider with no buildings or ranches. Jagged-peaked mountains rise up in the background. Mongolia has the lowest population density in the world – less than three million people live in the country, which is bigger than Texas, California and Montana combined. Many of these people are among the poorest in the world; 36 percent live on fewer than \$2 a day. For Megan and Jeff, the trip, which has dragged into a third day of bumping and jostling in a Land Cruiser, has become a test of endurance. The final five to 10 miles takes about two hours because of the undulating terrain. The only person Megan and Jeff have seen for hundreds of miles is the man that took a toll for passing over a log bridge. When they finally arrive at their destination, they look out into the sweeping landscape, and they can't help but wonder if anyone is going to come to the clinic once they set it up.*



**Dr. Megan Evans, M.D.**  
Photo by James Woodcock

**by stephan kosnar**  
**photos courtesy of**  
**Megan and Jeff Evans**

In Mongolia, Megan's work not only involved seeing patients, but she also helped educate local doctors. She gave presentations on women's and children's health issues, as well as first aid training. Megan found the doctors to be eager to learn how health care professionals provide care in the U.S.

"They weren't so much concerned about the disparities between us and them, they just wanted to know how we do it in the U.S.," Megan explained. She was sometimes surprised by their questions because she knew the doctors wouldn't have access to the same means as doctors in the U.S.

"They still wanted to know what we do," she said, smiling at the memory of the local doctor's enthusiasm.

Megan realized the local doctors in some ways were influenced by the "celebrity" status American doctors had, but their attitudes transcended this, and in the end, the local doctors were in search of "best practices" of delivering care. Although the local doctors had less medical education than U.S. doctors, she found them to be smart with impressive skills.



**Photo: The land in Mongolia is vast and sparsely populated.**

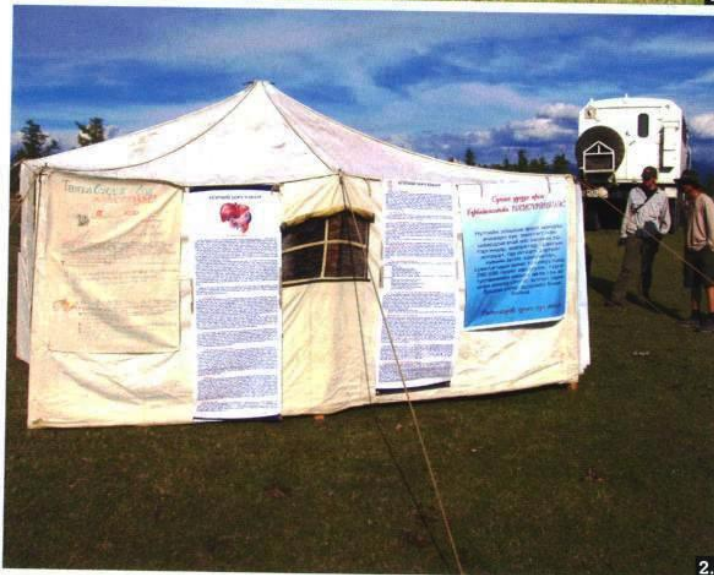
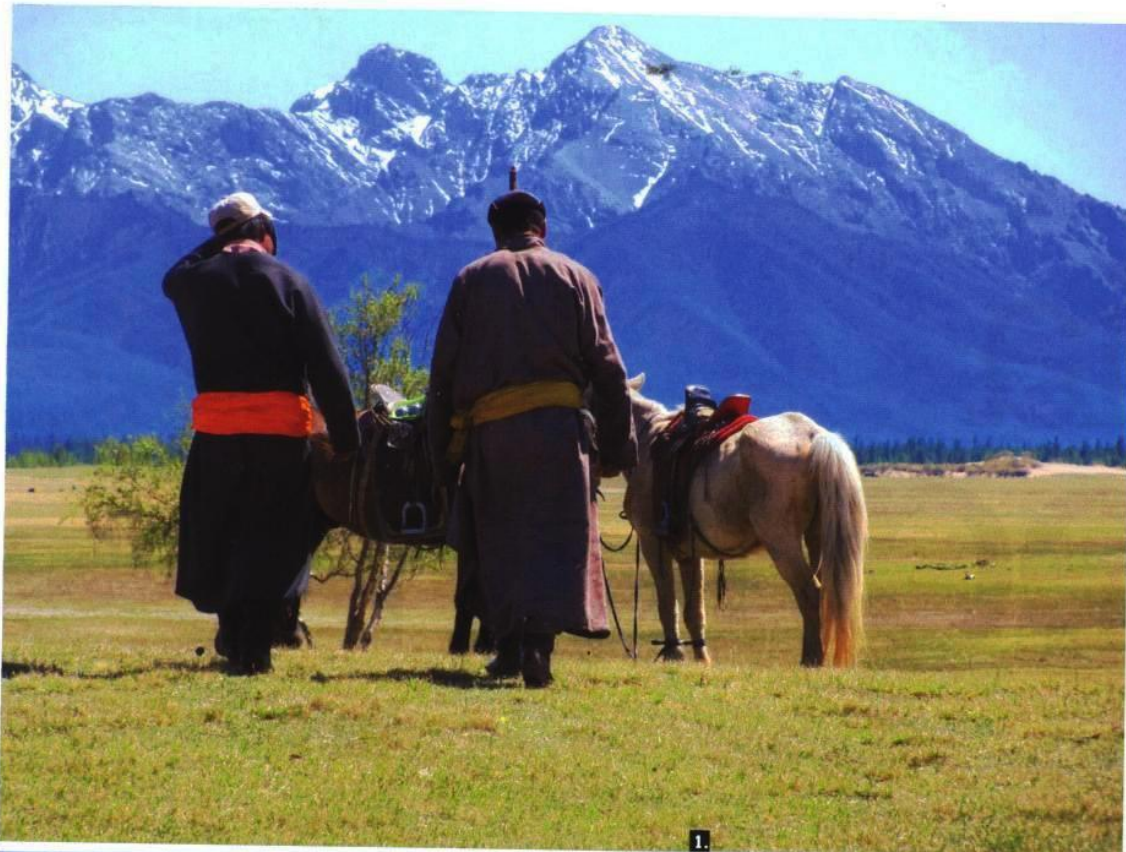




# Ingolia nnnection

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After setting up a ger – the Mongolian word for yurt – and spending the night, Megan and the others wake up and are ready to see patients. It's quiet and still around the white, circular structure. Megan plans on mostly performing patient screenings for hypertension. Many in the region smoke and eat a diet high in salt. Jeff will help with taking blood pressure and pulse readings. The calm is broken, though, by the rumbling of an engine and shouts of, "We need a doctor. We need a doctor." Two men appear—one has been badly injured in a motorcycle accident. Megan believes the man has fractured both his tibia and fibula and his leg needs a splint. With few medical supplies on hand, she uses fire wood and duct tape, and then through an interpreter, tells the injured man he needs to get an X-ray at the nearest hospital, which is a 10-hour trip. The man nods, and after he leaves with his friend, Megan and Jeff step outside. In the distance near the horizon, there is movement. Slowly, the specks become bigger and bigger, until the forms – people and horses – can be made out. It's like a scene from the movie, "Field of Dreams", "build it, and they will come."

Previous pages: The Darhad Valley, looking onto the Tengis and Shisget Rivers' confluence. 1] Two young Mongolian cowboys travel to attend a blood pressure screening. 2] Posters written in Mongolian present health information to patients attending screenings.

3] The BioRegions health team: Otgonjargol Badamsuren, Lora Soderquist, Scott White, Ryan Wallace, Megan Evans, Battur Enkhbattur and Jeffrey Evans. 4] Child of a Mongolian doctor.

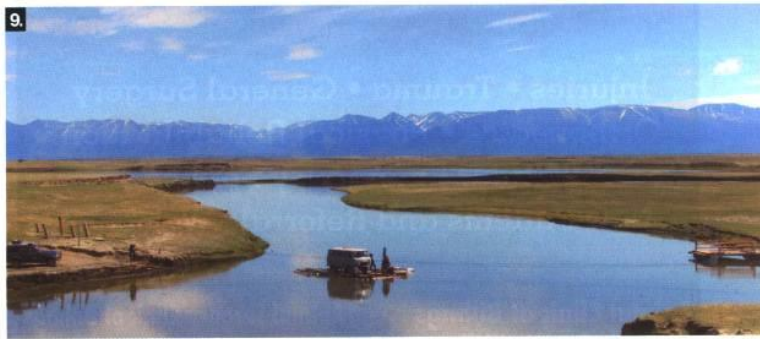
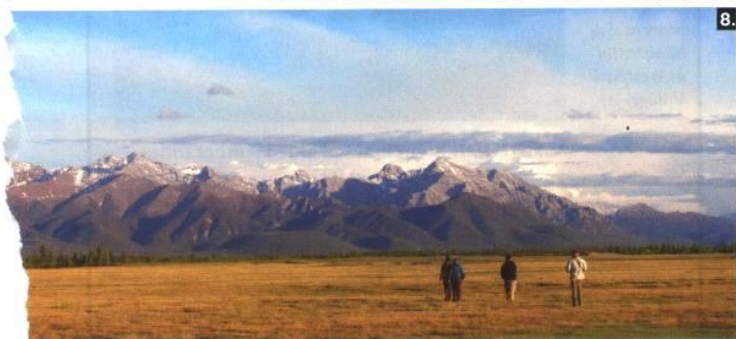
5] Yaks are readily used to transport goods. 6] University of Washington Medical Student, Ryan Wallace, takes the blood pressure of a Mongolian herder. 7] A Russian van, called a "forgon," uses a ferry. 8] Megan Evans and three other med students walk toward the Horidal-Saridag mountains in the Darhad Valley. 9] The ferry successfully transports the van across the pond.



In Billings, Dr. Megan Evans is a family practice physician at the Montana Family Medicine Residency, working at RiverStone Health, St. Vincent Healthcare and Billings Clinic. Her time in Mongolia was a rotation that she coordinated with a special outreach program at Montana State University. The program, called BioRegions, has been in existence for the past 12 years in the Darhad Valley of Mongolia. Their mission is to coordinate with rural Mongolian community members to better understand their needs and then work together to preserve culture, environment, education and health. Susan Gibson, BioRegions health team coordinator, selects the health team each year. This year the team included herself, Megan, Jeff, two medical students from the University of Washington and two medical students from the Health Sciences University of Mongolia. Susan taught in Mongolia in 1994 and 1995.

"I saw the need then to help them update their health care education and ways to do things," said Susan. It's only been over the last three years, however, that a resident physician from the Montana Family Medicine Residency has joined Susan and her team working in





Mongolia. She feels the program has benefited greatly from the residents' skills and knowledge. "Megan was great because the others really used her as a mentor. She's a very good teacher," Susan said.

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*The man injured in the motorcycle accident stays nearby during the day and later that night comes by to ask Megan for something for the pain. She gives him Aleve. This will be all he ever asks for, and he is genuinely grateful for the care he receives. A couple of weeks later when Megan returns to the area, she inquires about the man and is told his leg had swelled badly and was red. She figures it is probably infected, and the man never made it to the hospital because he lacked the money.*

Wearing a polar fleece vest with the University of Colorado – Denver (where she went to medical school) written on the front, Megan looks like she would be just as comfortable outside – skiing down a mountain or floating a river – as she is inside. She grew up in the small town of Wilsall, Mont., whose population hovers around 250 people. Megan has fond memories of being outside working on the family ranch, fixing fences and salting cows. On summer nights, she looked forward to driving in to town to play basketball with the other kids in the area. Her husband Jeff, who works in the fishing department at Cabela's, has on a camouflage baseball cap with an outfitters logo on front. He took up fishing later in life. Growing up in Red Lodge, he was all about skiing, joining his first racing team when he was only five. Megan and Jeff met at a party while they were both attending Montana State University. They laugh simultaneously thinking of the first time they met; and the laughter continues, acting as a blanket concealing details, until Jeff said, "Megan's best friend was dating my best friend."

While Jeff had traveled internationally several times growing up,

**"I saw the need then to help them update their health care education and ways to do things."**

— Susan Gibson,  
BioRegions health team coordinator

Megan had only been away once on a basketball trip to Australia and New Zealand. It was in college that she first realized she wanted to travel outside the U.S. to do work in a developing country, but she wouldn't be able to find the opportunity until the Mongolia rotation during residency.

Megan is soft-spoken and self-described as shy. Going to Mongolia where she would be doing presentations in front of people that didn't even speak the same language was daunting. Adding to the stress was the fact that she wasn't exactly sure what material to present. But Megan knew it was an opportunity to help people, which is why she had become a doctor. In college she majored in biochemistry and didn't know what profession she wanted to pursue. She didn't want to do research. When she thought about the fact that she was best working one-on-one with people, and, furthermore, she wanted to help people, becoming a doctor seemed like an excellent fit.

When Megan thinks of the most fulfilling aspect of her time in Mongolia, it was working with and educating the local doctors. "I couldn't help all the people I saw," said Megan. One of these patients was a man who had

been severely burned in a gasoline fire – siphoning gas was commonplace in the region. "It was nice to know how useful the information was for the doctors – for example I did some obstetrics training, and they have to deal with babies being born in the middle of nowhere and they were just really enthusiastic to learn."

Megan's experience in Mongolia reaffirmed what she has always known about where she wants to work, and that's back in her home town. The people and local doctors in the Darhad Valley were genuine, resilient and appreciative – like the man injured in the motorcycle accident. And these same characteristics are what Megan values in the people of Wilsall.

"These people raised me—it's like a large community family," Megan explained. "These are the people I want to take care of."

