

Burning Man a test for medical personnel



Medical staff at Burning Man contend with a variety of conditions. Photos/Gary Johnson

By Linda Fine Conaboy

RENO – Burning Man can be the best and the worst experience of your life – “you can die out there.”

Although Gary Johnson, an assistant professor and practicing doctor at UNR Medical School, said this with a bit of a tongue-in-cheek attitude, the doctor in him took over as he listed some of the maladies that have become familiar to the medical team he heads up.

Five years ago, the medical school asked him to become

officially involved in Burning Man by providing care administered by UNR medical students; hence his nickname, G-Man or the Dusty Doctor. G-Man refers to his first name.

Even though all of the medical services are free, a trip in a helicopter provided by CareFlight can run as much as \$25,000. In the hospital tent, seven doctors are on staff at all times, with nine ambulances at the ready. In 2010, they treated 4,700 people with a few of those triaged to outside medical facilities.

Some of the unique medical problems include what Johnson calls playa foot, a condition that can eat away the skin of the foot, caused by alkali dust. The remedy, he said, is easy and includes washing the feet in vinegar and water followed by lots of lotion.

Tents temporarily secured by metal rebar tend to fly away in the wind leaving the unforgiving rebar exposed. Because of this, many people each year are treated in the medical tents for wounds caused by tripping over it. It's an easy problem to fix, Johnson said, recommending using tennis balls to cover and mark the exposed menace.

Drugs, especially ecstasy, are wildly available and can cause numerous problems. Burning Man may not be the best place for a first experience with LSD, he added.

The dust, although a vital part of the experience, must be reckoned with. You have to prepare for it, Johnson said, adding that asthmatics are particularly vulnerable in the dust. He recommends ski goggles, masks and even bandanas worn over the face.



Burning Man has become more regulated through the years.

In his humorous yet serious way, Johnson listed some basic survival tips including good hydration, lubrication and salinization. Wear your vinegar, he said, indicating the importance of the stuff. Stay off trampolines unless you're 10; bring your own prescription drugs; avoid helicopters; and recreate within your comfort zone.

Surprisingly, despite the news stories that filter out of Burning Man each year, substance abuse-related accidents are much lower than expected—generally only about 2.5 percent of those treated.

With four satellite first aid stations, climate-controlled MASH tents, rehydration stations, X-ray, suturing and casting facilities, a limited formulary pharmacy, a basic lab and even a sanctuary where overwhelmed folks can come to talk out their problems, Johnson said Burning Man is now safer than ever.

For the newcomers, he has a few wise words: Don't get overly ambitious with your camp; go with experienced people in an established camp for your first time out and perhaps most important, don't stay too long.

Johnson discovered Burning Man by accident in 1992 when he and some of his Fernley High School friends decided to spend a few days camping on the playa outside of Gerlach.

“It sounded like some satanic thing in the dessert,” he laughed during his recent presentation at Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center on the UNR campus. But satanic or not, he was intrigued enough to return the following year and said he was “totally welcome.”

Although the history of the massive event has been fairly well told, Johnson succinctly recapped its evolution, which began on Baker Beach in San Francisco in 1986, moved to Nevada in 1990, and each year becomes the state’s fourth or fifth largest city for a few days.

“It was a surreal experience then,” Johnson said. “There were no police. Those were the good old days. Burning Man is not the same as it was.” He said there was lots of sex, even more drugs and the area abounded with an ample supply of explosives.

The population on the playa doubled each year with, in Johnson’s words, weird tents and cars driving everywhere. “Thousands of people were going to the dessert. Lots of problems developed in the early days.”

Perhaps because of a freak accident in the early days—two people were run over in their tent—nowadays, the only motorized vehicles allowed to traverse the area are service vehicles or “substantially modified vehicles with interactive art,” and then, they can only drive 5 mph.

To make getting around in the huge, temporary city easier, a grid pattern was developed and street signs erected. Even with these precautions, Johnson said getting lost amid the dust and total nighttime darkness at Black Rock City is easy. For this reason he recommends carrying a GPS and a flashlight, especially at night.

The place is patrolled day and night by fire and police units. "They're very serious out there now," Johnson said. "Now it's an organized city with an infrastructure and it's become much more family friendly."

In 2010, there were 600 registered art cars and 700 officially registered theme camps and villages. All individual camps are encouraged to be visually interesting and interactive; those offering food must be cleared by the health department, and if there's liquor involved, camp hosts are required to card anyone partaking.

People are dressed up 24/7, although it's considered tacky for a man to wear a shirt and no pants, he chuckled. Even though all food must be approved by the Pershing County Health Department, gifting is a good thing, he said.

The best part of Burning Man for Johnson is the art. "But the friendly, warm attitude of the people is overwhelming—it's good. I enjoy the melting pot aspect with so many people from many different countries. It's truly an international audience, especially among South Africans."

After all the Burners are finally able to make their way out of the huge traffic jams created by the mass migration of campers heading home, the clean-up crew takes over, sweeping and cleaning the site meticulously. Because there are no trash cans, it's important to take everything out.

Johnson said for him Burning Man gets better each year. "The early years were a little scary. I loved the freedom, but now, I like the organization."