

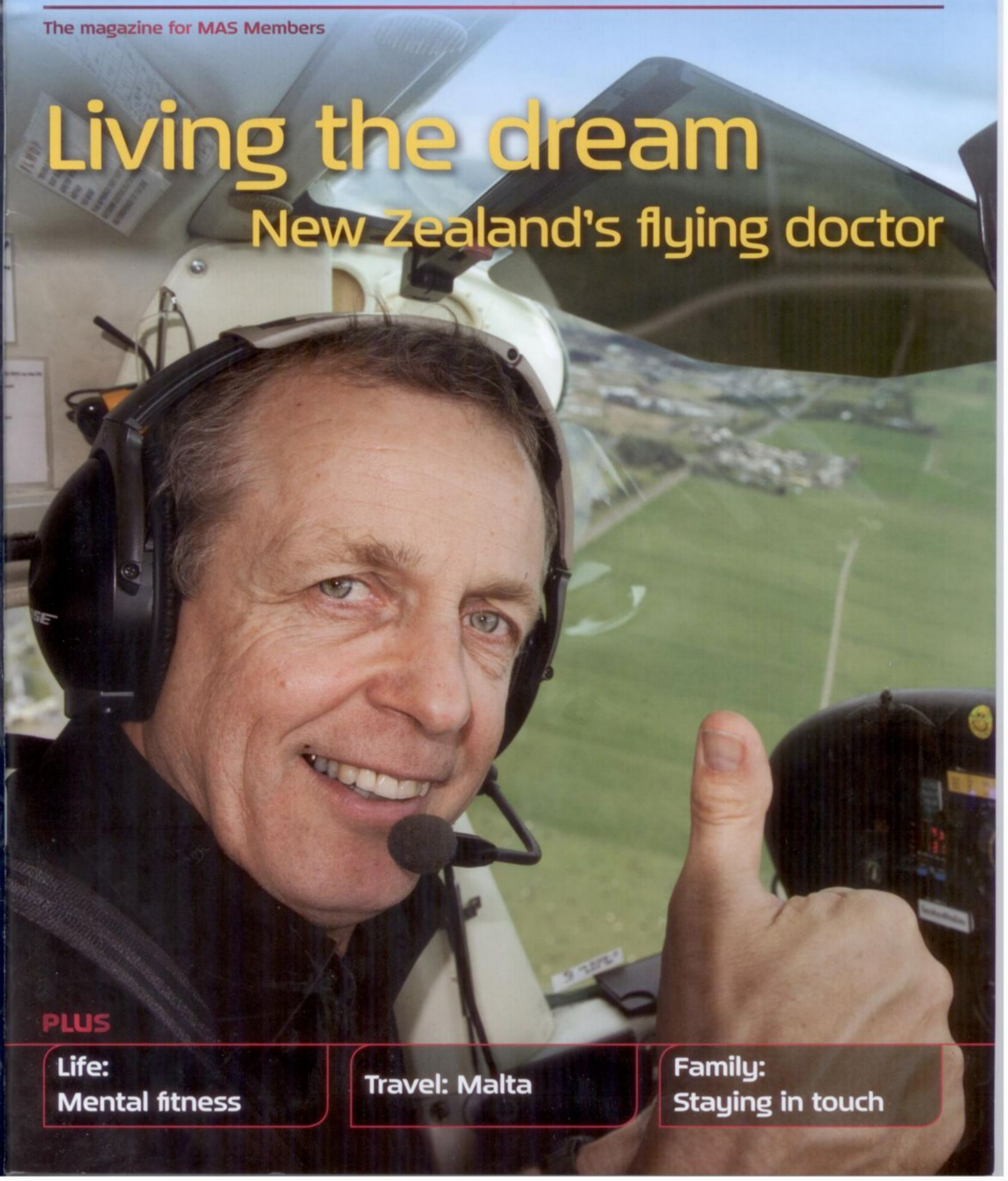
On MAS

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The magazine for MAS Members

Living the dream

New Zealand's flying doctor



PLUS

Life:
Mental fitness

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Living the dream

Dr Dave and son Marc, also a pilot, with the single-engine Cessna 172 airplane that equips the Bulls Flying Doctor Service.

On MAS talks to MAS Member and star of print and screen, Dr Dave Baldwin, about his flying doctor service and campaign against unhealthy behaviour in the male population.

 By Nick Helm

Dr Dave Baldwin has a rather nice view from his office window – or through his office windshield, to be more precise. He’s an aviation physician, and he spends much of his time at 5,000 feet, flying his single-engine Cessna 172 to some of the most beautiful and remote regions of the country.

A wildly outdoorsy type and the quintessential good Kiwi bloke, Dr Dave, as he has affectionately become known among the pilots he examines, operates the Bulls Flying Doctor Service, a job he says is like being on top of the world and is “pretty bloody good, mate”.

But Dr Dave is a far cry from a local hick who happened to get lucky in his med school exams. Behind the rough exterior and Crumpesque vernacular is an astute mind with a burning concern for the declining health of the working classes in New Zealand. He says men, in particular, have drawn the short straw when it comes to health problems and he is determined to do something about it.

His ‘Healthy Bastards’ public health campaign uses plain-speaking medical advice and a bit of rough humour – wrapped up in down-to-earth Kiwi blokeishness – to reach a male audience that he says is in dire need of better preventative healthcare.

He regularly gives talks to rural communities and groups of prison inmates, where he tackles the big stuff: smoking and heart disease, diet and exercise, the importance of prostate exams and, well, generally how to be a healthy bastard.

He takes full advantage of the media’s love of his colourful antics, and has featured in numerous articles and television slots. He’s even released *Healthy Bastards* the movie and written books to help Kiwi men keep themselves healthy, and there’s talk of his own television series somewhere down the line.

But Dr Dave didn’t start out with such strong convictions for medicine.

A bumpy take-off

"It was all a bit of a mistake, really. Early on, I had no interest in being a doctor. I was more into rugby and basketball, and had pretty average grades, so it never dawned on me," he says.

"I wanted to be a deer culler, but my mother had always thought that I was some sort of a great academic hope, so she kept ranting on at me to go to university," he says.

"So to keep her quiet, I offered to go to Massey University and start a Bachelor of Science, even though I didn't really like science and had failed it in School Certificate," says Dave.

"I was pretty determined though, so I started to work hard."

That's when something strange began to happen.

"Massey was a very competitive university and students would ask me what I planned to study after my first year. I'd tell them I just wanted to finish the BSc and then go deer culling. They'd look at me oddly and leave me alone at first," he says. "But I started to get the same grades as people applying to go to veterinary and medical school, so it wasn't long before they didn't believe me – and just to shut them up, I told them I was applying for med school as well," he says.

"What absolutely floored me was that they took it seriously, and I began to think that maybe I could be a doctor. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad job."

The following year, Dave and 150 other students began their first year at the Dunedin School of Medicine.

"There were a few big brains in there, a few duxes of colleges and the like, but the majority were just very hardworking people who had done the yards to get the grades. That was me; I'm not high on the IQ stakes, I'm just a bloody hard worker down in the trenches," he says.

"And that's one of my strengths. I didn't rise up through the top echelons of college and get funnelled into medical school, so I sort of feel in tune with the street, if you know what I mean. A lot of my mates ended up as tradesmen and that's the way I see myself as a doctor. I'm a body mechanic really. I'm highly trained and I work hard to keep the training level up, but I don't see myself as anything flash."

Flying toward freedom

With a mother who was a well known mountain climber, with several books on the sport to her name, Dave grew up in the outdoors and spent a good part of his teenage years in the bush. He enjoyed hunting and took any opportunity he could to get away.

"All that stopped when I got to medical school, because I was always studying like a dog and every exam was a battle," he says. "I was a bit like a caged animal. I often wondered where I would end up, because I didn't want to get cooped up like a chicken in some bloody surgery all day."

It was a chance encounter that opened his eyes to a new range of possibilities.

"I was at a social gathering as a trainee intern. The old professors were strutting around like peacocks with students trailing along behind them, but trainee interns are the lowest on the food chain, so no one wanted to talk to us," he says. "But I spotted a guy in the corner who I thought was a cleaner. 'He'll want to talk to me,' I thought, so I went over and had a chat. He turned out to be a GP from the Marlborough Sounds. What a fascinating guy. He told me about his practice that he ran from his boat and how he spent most of his day doing house calls. He was an inspiration."

In that watershed moment he realised it might be possible to combine medicine and his love of the outdoors.

After completing his vocational training in general practice, Dr Dave moved to Palmerston North Hospital, completed his pilot's examinations and joined the Officer Training Course with the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF). He graduated in 1989 to become the Base Medical Officer at Ohakea.

"I used to go up in the A4 Skyhawks all the time," he says. "I've experienced all the aerobatics, and had the vertigo. I've blacked out and vomited all over the place," he says.

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“But it was great fun. Being a fast jet doctor is really the best experience in the world for working with pilots and it set me up with my subspecialty in aviation medicine.”

Even so, he says he couldn’t help learn about new opportunities.

“I had a career in the Air Force all lined up, but the doctor just up the road in Bulls was retiring after nearly 50 years in practice,” he says. “I figured that if I left the Air Force and took over the practice to develop a medical centre, I could still work on the fast jet base, which was right next door.”

For a while, it was a relationship made in heaven, but in 2001 the Labour Government scrapped the RNZAF’s strike squadrons, mothballing the A4 squadrons and the pilots who flew them. It was an unexpected and unnecessary move that he says annoys him to this day.

A pilot doctor for pilots

“Fortunately, as I developed the practice, I also came up with the concept of the Bulls Flying Doctor Service,” he says.

Every active pilot and air traffic controller in New Zealand must, by law, undergo and pass a regular medical examination in order to obtain a current medical certification that allows them to operate.

Someone with either commercial or military aviation experience who has been certified as an examiner by the Civil Aviation Authority must carry out the medical exam.

“That’s my area of expertise,” says Dr Dave. “I provide a service where I go and see pilots in remote parts of New Zealand and give them aviation medical exams, rather than them having to find time to visit examiners.”

He uses a database to keep track of pilots’ names and licence expiration dates. A month or two before each expiry date, he makes contact, schedules a time to conduct the exam and draws up his flight plan accordingly.

He adds that it was very difficult in the early days, because a flying doctor for pilots was a totally new concept, but he slowly established relationships with a few pilots.

Word spreads quickly in remote parts of the country and he says that now he often receives calls asking if he can examine other pilots while he’s in the area, turning a single trip into an opportunity to see several pilots.

“It’s wonderful from my point of view, because I’m living the dream,” he says. “I fly about 25 hours a month, but I believe it’s some of the best flying in the world. I get to fly through the mountains at sunrise, experience the bush and just get away from it. I go to the remotest places in the West Coast, Gisborne, Milford and Otago, far away from the big cities.”

He adds that he’s met some interesting characters on his trips too.

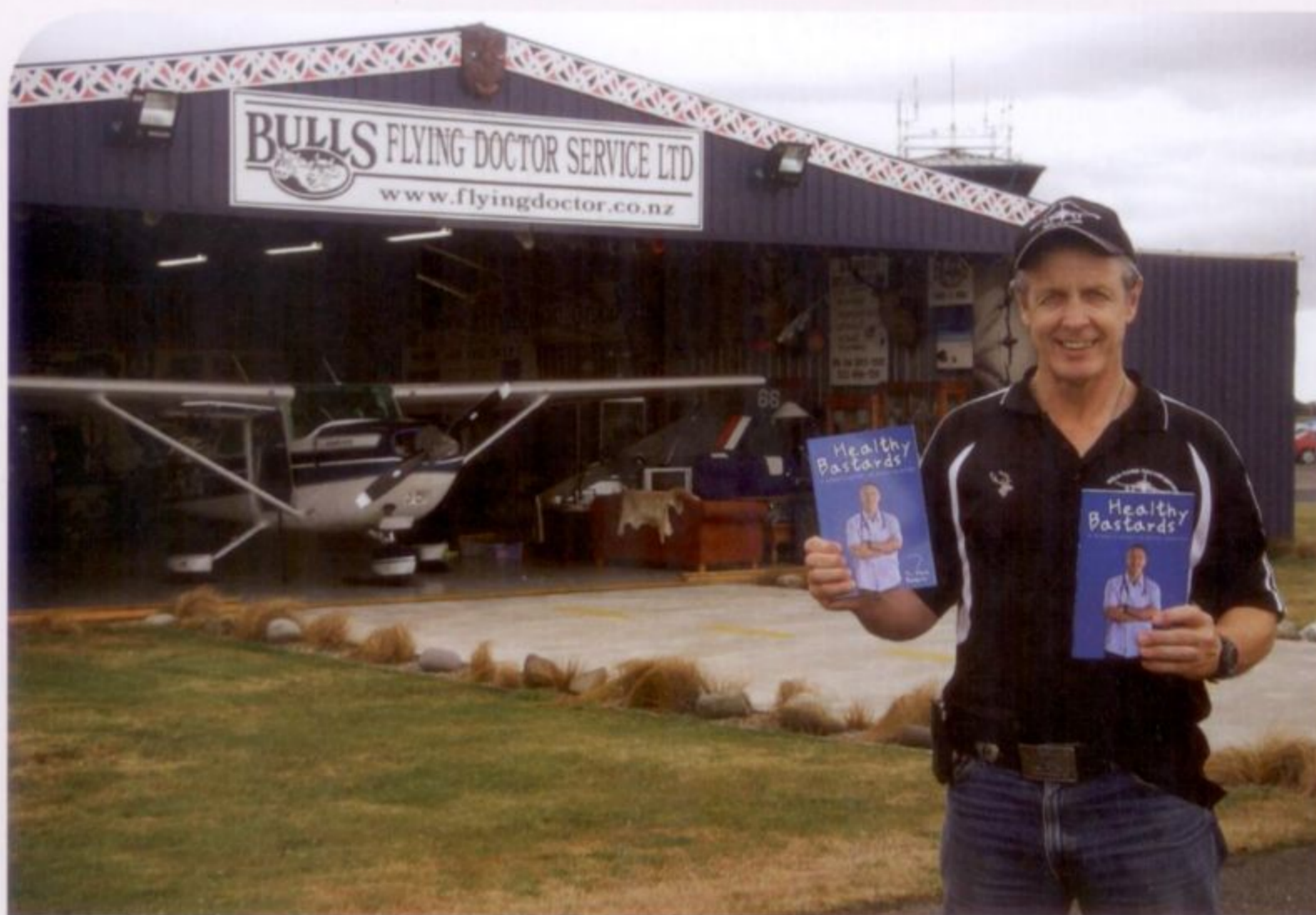
“You get great people out in the peripheries. I’m not saying all of them are perfect, like I’m not perfect, but they’re wonderful people who are grateful to see you,” he says. “I’ve been given so much whitebait over the years that there’s no way that I could ever finish it all.”

But he’s quick to admit that there is also a serious side to the job.

“I’m a bit like a small town cop in some ways. I’ve got a job to do and I’ve got to do what I’m told as a regulator,” he says. “I speak my mind and if a pilot doesn’t meet the rules, I have no problem grounding them – I’d ground myself if it came to it. That can get you into strife at times, but it also develops respect and I’ll always try my hardest and be fair.”

Get healthy, ya bastards!

Dr Dave says he began to notice the contrast between the good health of the pilots versus the poor health of many of his general practice patients, which first sparked the idea for a preventative health



Dr Dave Baldwin shows off one of the books from his Healthy Bastards campaign, part of his personal endeavour to educate the average Kiwi bloke about better health.

programme and ultimately led to the Healthy Bastards campaign.

He says that many health problems that cause blokes to die prematurely are due to self-induced illness, such as being overweight, smoking, eating poorly, not exercising and failing to have regular checkups with their GPs.

"I think it's important to recognise that a large percentage of our population have not realised that they need to take care of their bodies like any other bit of machinery," he says. "At the moment, New Zealand is one of the fattest countries in the world. It's disgraceful. And the politicians aren't taking this on board, so it's starting to be reflected in our blow-out health budgets."

He says it takes a lot of work to try to get that simple message across to the people who need it the most.

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His movie, for instance, takes a classic Dr Dave approach. The first hour talks directly to the common man, explaining how the body works and what it means to be healthy. It doesn't pull any punches, with scenes inside the body and in an operating theatre. The second hour follows Dr Dave around the South Island, where he meets local people and discusses how they can improve their health. He can't help but show off a bit of the countryside at the same time.

"I'm very happy with the movie. I hope the viewer will look at it and get a bit of a chuckle at some of these tough customers, but that's their view, their reality," he says.

"I believe that if you create a form of communication that gives good health advice with plenty of laughs, but doesn't talk down to people, you can get your messages across. I do a lot of talks all around the country to all types of people, simply to try to get the messages from the books and movie across to them."

He's clearly proud of the success he's had so far.

"I've proven that it can be done. Whether it's science or preventative health, I don't think that the people who change the world are always the most knowledgeable or intelligent, but they're always the ones who have been out there trying. I'm trying my hardest, so we will see how it goes," he says.

Tail winds

The scope of the task he's set himself can be daunting though.

"It is a major undertaking and I sometimes wonder whether I've bitten off more than I can chew. I work a fixed two-and-a-half-day week at the general practice in Bulls, I'm off on flying doctor visits at least two or three days per week, and then there's the Healthy Bastards campaign," he says. "So realistically, I work seven days a week, 16 hours a day. But there's no whining about it, because I'm moving forward all the time."

Any suggestion that he reduce his general practice hours is met with heartfelt disparagement.

"I'll never give up the general practice. I've been in Bulls for 22 years now and I love the continuity," he says. "I could never work in one of those accident and emergency clinics where people just come and go. I have patients here who I used to treat their mothers and fathers. It's a wonderful continuity – they know me warts and all and I know them warts and all."

"The practice also keeps me sharp clinically. I couldn't just do medical exams all day. I have to ensure that pilots are fit to fly, and doing half my time in the trenches with heart attacks, strokes, cancer and so on, I stay sharp and don't lose my skills. Staying sharp is so important in aviation and in aviation medicine."

He says it's sometimes tempting to pack it all in and head for the golf course, or more appropriately in his case, the bush or fishing hole, but he never thinks on it for long.

"By doing what I'm doing with the practice, the flying doctor service and the Healthy Bastards campaign, I'm interrelating with people and experiencing life in the best way possible," he says. "It's all win-win, isn't it? I just wish other people could be as lucky as me."

Good on ya mate. ■

Feilding air crash

While we've taken a light-hearted look at professional flying doctor services, it's important to recognise the risks that the pilots of light aircraft deal with every day. In some cases, these risks result in tragedy.

On MAS would especially like to acknowledge the loss of two Members who died in a tragic air accident near Feilding in January this year.

Ralph Saxe, 51, a general practitioner from Palmerston North and Brett Ireland, 50, a chiropractor who spent much of his career in Palmerston North, were both MAS Members for many years.

Managing Director of Palmerston North's Palms Radius medical centre, Ralph had a love of medicine and of flying, and had a passion for everything he took on. An experienced aerobatic pilot who owned several aircraft, Ralph's passing is a loss to not only the local health community, but the aviation community as well.

Brett was a charismatic doctor with a genuine regard for the well being of those he treated. Described as a visionary and a leader in patient care, his death was a tragic loss to the chiropractic profession in New Zealand and Australia.

On behalf of MAS and its Members, we would like to pass on our condolences to the families of Drs Saxe and Ireland. They will be sorely missed.

Our apologies to optometrist John Anstice who featured in our February Member story and was incorrectly described as an ophthalmologist.