

# Dr Ted Esguerra, leading the way in operational medicine in the country

DR LIGAYA SOLERA

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by. And that has made all the difference,” wrote Robert Frost. For most doctors, the road is pretty straightforward: pre-med, medical school, internship, residency, fellowship and so on. But one doctor, all his life, by chance or conscious choice, has been taking roads less traveled, and that has spelled all the difference for him and the people he has helped – in such settings as the ruins of Nepal, the snowy peaks of Mount Everest, and in his own beloved Philippines.

Dr Teofredo Esguerra, known to many simply as Doc Ted, has lived an unconventional life, to say the least. Even his childhood was not the usual: born to katutubo Bagobo parents in Davao del Sur, his mother died in childbirth and his father – who was much older than his mother and could not take care of an infant son by himself – had to make the difficult decision to give him away. According to Esguerra, his father took him down to the trading port by the river and – perhaps thinking he might as well get something out of it – exchanged him for a sack of rice.

## The reluctant doctor

Asked if his early experiences have affected his career choices, Esguerra cites his childhood friend Jonathan – a member of the Barredo clan



Participating in a medical mission in Ichowk, Lantang Reservation, Nepal, after the recent earthquake.

that initially adopted him – whose infectious passion for airplanes instilled a similar love of flying in the young Esguerra. Jonathan’s father was a pilot, recalled Esguerra, and it was due to their family’s influence that Esguerra later developed an interest in aviation medicine.

Not that Esguerra actually had any interest

in medicine at first – his true passion was the arts and the outdoors. He took a break after his second year of medical school because he felt that what he really wanted was to be a musician and a painter. The decision disheartened his adoptive parents, and in an ironic twist of fate, Esguerra's adoptive mother developed cancer. Esguerra subsequently resolved to complete his medical studies and eventually passed the medical boards.

### **Training in the Middle East**

While doing his residency training, Esguerra continued to compose and play music. In fact, he says, in Bicol at that time, he was probably known more for his music than for his profession. It was during a musical gig that a friend introduced him to a client who was in the Philippines to recruit nurses and doctors for a hospital in Saudi Arabia. Esguerra's medical résumé did not, by itself, arouse the recruiter's interest; rather, it was his background in mountaineering and his interest in the outdoors that made the latter think he would be a good fit for one particular vacancy: medical evacuation officer at the Armed Forces hospital.

Esguerra quit residency and accepted the job offer. What followed was an exciting period of practice in a non-mainstream field of medicine. In addition to gaining valuable experience, Esguerra got to attend various trainings related to his work – aviation firefighting, ACLS, critical care, combat medicine and air medical evacuation, to name just a few – conducted by instructors from such organizations as NASA and the British and American armed forces.

His time in Saudi also helped shape his character further. The discrimination Esguerra experienced as a Filipino made him more determined to excel. It was also in Saudi that he gained a deeper understanding of Islam and became a practicing Muslim.

### **Operational medicine expert**

Esguerra parlayed his experience in Saudi into becoming one of only few operational medicine experts in the Philippines today.

Among Esguerra's exploits: leading the specialized medical assistance response team for the Philippine Coast Guard, acting as physician to Philippine National Police teams on special assignments, participating in rescue efforts after the recent Nepal earthquake, and accompanying a geothermal energy company's scientific expedition to the Andes mountains.

Perhaps his most memorable mission was as physician of the Philippine Mt. Everest expedition team. It was especially challenging yet fulfilling for Esguerra because, unlike more prominent Philippine expedition teams, his team did not have much funding. At Everest, he reached 23,000 feet but could not go higher even if he wanted to – as team physician, he had to make himself available at all times. That's the way it is, Esguerra said. Sometimes you have to stay still and let others stand on your shoulders.

### **Life and legacy**

Today, Esguerra trains people in emergency readiness and response, both as an independent consultant and as head of the 13-member disaster and crisis team of the Energy Develop-

ment Corporation.

People often don't prepare for emergencies because they don't know their worth, Esguerra says. Enforcement of existing regulations is also inadequate. If he had the power, he said, "If I see you walking in the street during a storm, I will imprison you. If I see you in your house and you're not following the building code, I will really imprison you."

In his capacity as an operational medicine expert, Esguerra shares his knowledge and experiences in the field with schools and medical societies and has appeared countless times on television. It has gotten to the point where people would call him at 4 AM to ask for help. "People see you as the solution to all problems. If there's a disaster, they turn to you." He says his inboxes are full of messages from people asking advice on such topics as what to do when there's an earthquake. "I feel obliged to answer. I cannot turn off my cell-phone anymore."

Asked if he has ever thought of retiring, Esguerra said, "When you do what you love, and you love what you do, and you're happy, it always stays with you." "Maybe physically I'll grow weak, but I can sit down and teach people. Even if you're sitting down or in your deathbed, as long as you can talk, you can inspire people to achieve more."

Of course, Esguerra isn't waiting until he's old and immobile to start passing on his skills. Aside from advising the general public, he is one of the trainers for Wilderness Search and



Dr Esguerra (standing, 4th from left) with the Energy Development Corporation Emergency Preparedness & Disaster Response Unit at the hangar of INAEC, a transport service provider; the team uses the hangar as forward operations base – operations center during disasters.

Rescue (WISAR) Philippines. He unselfishly passes on everything he knows to his team. "If I teach you, even if you do not remember me, eventually I will still benefit. I know that if something happens to me and I end up needing your help, I will live."

For doctors who are interested in becoming an operational medicine specialist, Esguerra suggested taking short courses. Countries such as Belize and the United Kingdom, for example, offer trainings in expedition medicine.

He dismissed the idea of being called, say, the father of operational medicine in the Philippines. "Why? At the end of the day, what will that give you? Will it really give you joy? At the crossroads of life, I don't talk about legacy, I just talk of a life of honor, a life of hard work, a life of humility...and also with patches of humor."

What's more important, he said, is kindness. "Find ways. Find ways to study, to know more about life, find ways to be more kind. Find ways so that, in the end, someone can say: I have lived easier because of you." 