

AMY SUE BIONDICH, MD '09, F '15

From Emergency to Prevention

After completing her first year of medical school, Amy Sue Biondich, MD '09, F '15, returned to her home state of Wisconsin and spent her summer earning her pilot's license. She bought a small propeller plane that would serve her well flying home for visits and in her future career as a locums tenens emergency medicine physician.

Over her decade working in emergency departments from Florida and Wisconsin to Minnesota and Arizona, Biondich realized how many of her patients' ailments could be impacted by their habits and lifestyle choices. "There are so many chronic diseases that are preventable or reversible that people don't have to be living with," she says. "I wanted to address that."



Amy Sue Biondich, MD '09, F '15, earned her pilot's license while an Upstate medical student, allowing her to fly herself to her locums tenens jobs.

Living in Boise, Idaho, since 2020, Biondich continues doing critical access work in small rural hospitals in Idaho and Wisconsin. But in March 2023, bolstered with a fellowship and board certification in anti-aging and regenerative medicine, she launched a virtual functional medicine practice. "I love emergency medicine and don't know that I would ever step away from it completely, but I want to empower people to take control of their health."

Many of her patients come to her feeling not quite right, but without anything obviously wrong. "In modern healthcare, your doc-

tor visit is a seven- to 10- minute conversation with a blood pressure check and maybe some bloodwork. And when the basic bloodwork comes back normal, the patient is told they're fine," says Biondich, who earned a bachelor's degree in anthropology and marine biology from University of California, Santa Cruz and a master's in evaluative clinical sciences from Dartmouth College.

"I do longer visits to try to understand more about the patient, not only as a person, but all of their health frustrations and fears and what their health goals are. I'm a big fan of test and treat not guess and treat, so I perform a lot of functional medicine labs to come up with a personalized plan for each patient. Many of my recommendations are lifestyle changes, stress management, diet, and supplements."

As a medical student, Biondich set out to be a general surgeon, focusing almost all her elective rotations on surgery. But after her first year of residency, she left her program, turned off by the misogyny she encountered and a future of long hours on call. A year later she re-matched into emergency medicine, completing her residency at Orlando Regional Medical Center, then returned to Upstate for a fellowship in wilderness and expedition medicine.

Working with then-program director Jeremy Joslin, MD, HS '10, F '11, Biondich began providing medical support to marathons and endurance competitions. In 2014, she established a concierge travel medicine company to serve as medical director for international ultra-endurance races, most of them held in remote far-flung locales, including Cambodia, Albania, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan.

Working three or four competitions a year put Biondich out of the country for eight to 10 weeks annually. "Trying to find a medical group accepting of that was going to be challenging so I gravitated to locums work so I could control my own schedule," she says.

Biondich has always loved travel and enjoys an active lifestyle, including mountain biking, rock climbing, snowboarding, skiing, backpacking, and hiking, pursuits that helped prepare her for race medicine. "You have to be physically fit to do this work," she says. "Many of the courses are not accessible by vehicle."

At Jungle Marathon Brazil, for example, a competitor suffered a cardiac event and collapsed deep in the jungle. "We had to get in there with dirt bikes and pull him out on a handmade stretcher made from tree limbs," says Biondich. "That's a dramatic example. A lot of the time we're dealing with blisters, dehydration, and heat illness."

Although she's had less hands-on wilderness medicine experience since the pandemic, Biondich loves the variety her career provides. "I like to do different things, to learn something new, to try something new," she says. "I'm just excited to see what this new chapter brings."

—Renée Gearhart Levy