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Cool job: Anesthesiologist saves vacations, one hangover at a time



by Kenya McCullum | May 2, 2013

1

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You've gone to Sin City, indulged in all the debauchery it has to offer, and now you're suffering for it. They say what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, but if your trip gets ruined because you had a hangover, that humiliating story will manage to haunt you for months, or even years, after you've gotten home.

But anesthesiologist Dr. Jason Burke wants to spare you that embarrassment. In fact, he's trying to rid Vegas of hangovers all together. It's a lofty goal, but this Dr. Feelgood of sorts is using his medical expertise in his business, [Hangover Heaven](#), to relieve Las Vegas tourists of their hangover symptoms within minutes -- thanks to a cocktail of drugs similar to what you might find in a hospital setting.

Dr. Burke discusses how he went from prestigious surgery centers around the country to a bus-based practice parked in the city of sin, and why treating hangovers has become so important to him.

How did you come up with the idea for Hangover Heaven?

I was working in the recovery room and there was this rash of people coming through with post-operative nausea and vomiting, post-operative headaches, and other various issues. And there had been a big party the weekend before, where a lot of people ended up with hangovers, and I thought, "These same drugs would work well for a hangover."

There are people who have been doing hydration for decades for their hangovers, and if you're 20 or 25, straight hydration may help a lot because the hangovers aren't as severe. But when you're 40, and you're in Las Vegas and you have a bad hangover, you need more than just hydration.

How do you handle scheduling appointments at Hangover Heaven?

I'd say that 25 to 30 percent of our business is pre-booked, usually weeks in advance -- especially for the bachelor parties, bachelorette parties, divorce parties, or whatever the case may be. Another 20 percent is probably booked a day or two in advance, when people hit Vegas and they think "Oh my gosh, I know I'm going to need this!" Then other people will call us the day of the day of the appointment, after they wake up in the morning feeling wrecked.

What is the patient experience like at Hangover Heaven?

A lot of people, especially when we first launched, were a little apprehensive, saying things like, "I'm going to get a hangover treated on a bus?" They also seemed to be a bit stressed about the IV, but when they get on the bus, they're like, "Wow, this thing's nicer than I thought it was going to be. It's nicer than a lot of medical offices!"

When patients come in and get the IV in, they usually start feeling better within about 10 or 15 minutes. Then they start hanging out with other people on the bus, so they all have a good time. It's interesting how the physical environment affects the nature of people's interactions here.

Do people ever throw up on the bus?

Oh, yeah! We have barf bags on the bus, and in a typical weekend we'll use three or four.

Do people come to you while they're still drunk?

We've had some people try. It's usually easy to figure that out over the telephone, and we tell them they need to wait a little while. That's the nice thing about being in a separate location from the casinos -- we sort that out before they get there. It starts getting awkward dealing with drunken people and IVs. It's just not a good thing to have them mixed together.

When you came up with the idea for Hangover Heaven, did you feel any apprehension about using your medical training in this way?

Oh, yeah! I knew there was going to be some fallout by taking what I knew how to do very well and applying it to hangovers. Originally when I thought of it, I wondered if anyone had ever died of a hangover and I wasn't sure. Now that I've treated bouts of hangovers, I'm certain that somebody's died of a hangover at some point, so I actually feel really good about this because I'm helping people do something in a safer fashion. When people have violent vomiting, they can get esophageal tears and people die from that. I guarantee someone has done that in the history of hangovers.

But with the image I put forth from my training from Duke University -- we did huge cases there and it's probably one of the best anesthesia departments in the country, and one of the most competitive residency programs -- I thought, "What are my colleagues back in Duke going to think of me?"

What do other doctors you know think about it?

A lot of people applaud my efforts because they recognize it's something that needs to be treated and it's an innovative business idea. But I do think about the residency program director at Duke -- and the liver transplant, the heart/lung transplant, and all the crazy huge cases we did for her -- sitting there and thinking, "We trained this guy to do the hardest cases on the face of the planet, and he's treating hangovers on a bus!"

That's really my biggest issue with it: I have all of these different abilities from the training I had, and I'm using a lot of the innovative skills I learned. It just makes me wonder sometimes.

Since you still do some clinical work, do patients ever recognize you from Hangover Heaven?

You know, some of the patients have seen me on television, and it made me realize how many people watch that show on Showtime called "Gigolos," because they filmed part of an episode on the bus. You'd be surprised how many people watch that show.

What's cool about your job?

Saving people's vacations. We get them turned around and all of a sudden they're like "Wow, I can enjoy my vacation again."

Fixing people's vacations is nice because our clientele is a little more mature. They took all this time and effort to set up grandma and grandpa to watch the kids, they're coming to Vegas for three days and finally get to have a good time again with no diapers, bottles, and all the rest of that stuff. Then they get here and go crazy the first night, and the next morning one of them is ill. They may have bought a \$1,000 helicopter tour, made reservations at a nice restaurant that night, and without Hangover Heaven, they're going to go home and be like "the whole vacation was wrecked over a hangover!" All they'll talk about for the next year is how their spouse screwed up the whole vacation. There's a lot of relationship fallout that can happen from that.

What do you like least about your job?

The logistics. When people want their hangover cured, they want it cured now. Once they've made that decision, they want it five minutes ago. Dealing with getting the bus around and dealing with hung over people who are all fuzzy can be challenging. When people are in Vegas, it's like their brain has checked out. That's definitely the most aggravating thing about the job.

More about Dr. Jason Burke

What did you eat for breakfast? I had granola cereal.

Which day of the week is your favorite? Tuesday because I usually go to the gym on Tuesday morning.

Which day of the week is your least favorite? Sunday because I'm usually spent from the amount of business that comes in on Saturday.

What was the first job you ever had? I had a couple of little businesses when I was a kid -- a lawn mowing business and a car detailing business. The first employed position I had was working at this little deli, basically mopping floors and stuff, and that sucked. I didn't last long at that job; I just went back to detailing cars. Working for other people didn't work for me.

What makes you angry? Stupidity.

What makes you joyful? Seeing my kids succeed at something.

If you could have any job other than your own, what would it be? This is going to sound really nerdy, but I was a classics major as an undergrad at UNC and I loved the archeology classes, so I wouldn't mind being an archeology professor.

If you had the time and the money to study anything at all, what would you choose? Hangovers.

When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up? A veterinarian.

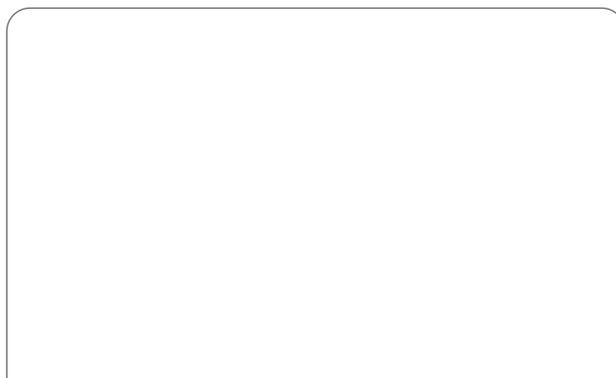
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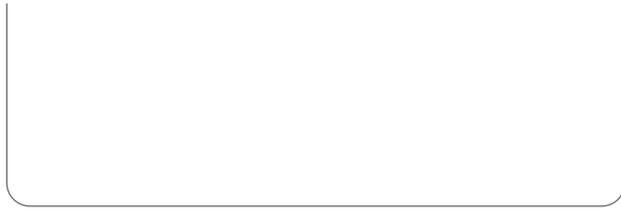
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