

Mountain doctors face steep slope

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Hom Strom

In the village of Scuol they are proud of a custom that is unique in Switzerland: On the first Saturday of February they burn the Hom Strom, or straw man. Straw - "strom" in the local language of Romansh - is right, but the resemblance to a "hom" - man - is minimal.



Straw is twisted and wrapped round a pole, which is then taken to a site above the village and set on fire. The Hom Strom is made by the children and teachers of the local school. The work involves not only making the effigy - which takes two or three hours of prickly work - but also collecting and threshing the straw. It is now grown specially by a local farmer, who is paid by the village. The school goes to the field, where the teachers cut it with scythes, and the children stack it.

It is all part of village life, as retired schoolmaster Balsler Biert explained. "Most of the teachers started twisting straw when they were small and when they are teachers themselves they know exactly how it works."

Nowadays girls take part along with boys in the Hom Strom, but one custom which is still definitely divided along sex lines is "Scheibenschlagen" - the hurling of burning wooden discs, which takes place in the village of Tavanasa and a few villages further down the Rhine valley. The boys make hundreds of wooden discs and take to a hill above the village where they heat them in a fire until they glow.

As they flick them into the village, they call out the name of their girlfriends. The women's role is to stand by and watch.

Mountain doctors face steep slope

The job of mountain doctor may conjure up an image of nature, fresh air and free time but in reality it is hard work and very time intensive.

Experts say these important family doctors, who in addition to serving remote communities often work on mountain rescue missions, are a dying breed.

They are calling for more efforts to make the job more attractive. Initiatives, such as an online platform to help mountain medics find cover, are also proving useful.

There are more or less enough doctors in the cities but as soon as you get out of the cities it's becoming a real problem - not only a problem of money or wanting to live in the mountains, but also a problem of living and working conditions.

This situation is well known to Bruno Durrer, a doctor in Lauterbrunnen and Mürren in the Bernese Oberland. "Right now we are two and a half doctors doing 24 hours service all year round, so it's quite a time commitment that also has consequences on our private life."

Durrer, who has been a mountain doctor for 22 years, can face challenging conditions, sometimes making house calls on skis or mountain bike. He also carries out emergency medical care for locals and tourists, undertaking around 200 helicopter rescue missions a year. The dangers of such missions were brought home last year when a doctor was killed while helping to rescue avalanche victims in the Diemtig Valley, also in the Bernese Oberland.

Durrer loves his job. But fewer doctors want to work in remote areas and he says people should not be surprised if young medics turn their back on the job.

Another reason is that many doctors are now women, many of whom have families and do not want to be on call 24 hours a day. One solution is to create joint

practices with two to three part-time doctors. This already exists in Mürren.

Finding locum cover is also problematic in remote areas. Help has come from Swiss Mountain Aid (Berghilfe), which serves people in mountain regions and is keen to ensure that medical care is as good there as in cities. It has set up an online job exchange platform, following a suggestion from their medical expert, himself a mountain doctor.

The year-old platform allows doctors to post their requirements or offers to work. Durrer, for example, found his assistant doctor there. Others have found a successor for their practice. Some retired doctors also like to keep working and would welcome taking over for a period.

Swiss Mountain Aid estimates that there are currently around 400 non-hospital mountain doctors in Switzerland, defined as working above 800 metres.

The image of family doctors needs a boost, especially at university level. According to a recent study, only ten per cent of medical students were considering the profession, which is not enough to replace the many retiring GPs. The GP issue has also become political, with the launch last year of a people's initiative on boosting the profession.

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Alter Mann

*Ein warmer Regenschauer fiel
Auf Buchsbaum, kugelig gestutzt,
Septemberapfel, wurmverhutzt;
Geruch von Dill und Petersil.*

*Die Wanderjahre sind nun aus,
Ich halte näher mich ans Haus.
Die Füsse tragen nicht mehr lang,
So sitz ich auf der Gartenbank,
Ich leg den Kopf hintüber still
Und rieche Petersil und Dill.*

Wilhelm Lehmann