Those participating in winter sports are at risk for severe and possibly fatal injuries. As Hungary has no ski resorts of its own, its large population of skiers must travel outside the country to take part in such recreational activities. This fact has led to the concept of “ski camp doctor” training for Hungarian physicians who might accompany organized groups, especially children, on such excursions. Such physicians should be broadly trained and experienced in general medicine, emergency care, travel medicine and wilderness medicine. They should also have basic outdoor skills and be experienced skiers. We describe a course specifically designed to develop the knowledge base and skills necessary for a qualified Hungarian ski camp doctor.

Introduction

In the year 2005, a fatal skiing incident involving children and adults occurred and resulted in extensive discussion in both medical and ski professional groups, and in the Hungarian mass media.1–4 As a result of those discussions, medical support for “ski camps,” especially for school-aged children, is often required by group leaders or escorting teachers. Physicians supporting such groups, however, have been mainly recruited from skiers’ family members or acquaintances, and they have variable medical training. These physicians often do not practice in either family medicine or emergency medicine, but rather work in more specialized disciplines. They, therefore, may be less well-trained in first aid, and especially in travel or wilderness medicine, which are important topics in outdoor and extreme sports.5 Injured participants on these excursions or in these camps should be treated on the spot by a well-prepared physician familiar with current and accepted practices applicable to the prehospital setting.6 This article describes the experiences of 1 European country, and some of the recommendations for training standards of those who provide medical care for traveling ski groups from that nation. We hope that it may serve as a model for medical professionals from other countries who wish to provide this type of support to travel groups.

Background

Hungary is a small country, with about 10 million inhabitants and without a coastline or high mountains. Adventure travelers and extreme winter sports fans must travel abroad, even for skiing. However, the country has 80 000 licensed SCUBA divers, and more than 500 000 skiers.7,8

Skiing, whether cross-country or downhill, can be dangerous for anyone. For people with chronic diseases, whether cardiovascular, pulmonary, or metabolic, this activity may be classified as an extreme sport. Therefore, it is in the interest of skiers, parents, travel associations, and even travel insurance companies that both injury prevention skills and high-quality medical treatment be provided to participants. For groups that travel out of the country, this might best be provided by a trained doctor traveling with the group.

This concept coincides with the development of a medical discipline that is new to Hungary—travel medicine. For accompanying ski groups, practitioners of travel medicine have to be familiar with a myriad of treatment options for trauma and illness away from normal clinical settings, with particular emphasis and training in altitude illnesses and problems associated with cold environments.9

Although practiced in the United States for some time, travel medicine, as a discipline, did not exist in Hungary until 2004 when Hungary joined the European Union.