

# Nobody Asked Me ...But - More GPs, not a surgeon, is what Salt Spring needs

By [Shilo Zylbergold - Gulf Islands Driftwood](#) Published: **September 28, 2011 10:00 AM**

I've been sitting on the fence on the Save Our Surgery (SOS) controversy for long enough, so it's time for me to weigh in with my opinion on the issue.

Why can't I be more like Peter Vincent, my alter ego, who on alternate weeks time-shares the same piece of Driftwood real estate on the south end of page 9 (some even claim we are one and the same person; think about it: have you ever seen the two of us in the same place at the same time?) If Peter doesn't care that he's hated by half the island population while only being mildly disliked by the other half, why should I?

First of all, let me make perfectly clear that some of my best friends are SOS supporters. In general, SOSers are intelligent human beings who show a passionate interest in the health concerns of Salt Spring Island. Although they may come from many different political camps, they are united in the belief that this island desperately needs a general surgeon more than any other medical need that is lacking at this time.

With all due respect, let me state in as mature a manner as is possible for me: SOSers are a bunch of weenies.

Let's examine the situation. In the best of possible worlds, we all would love to have a surgeon or three available at our beck and call just in case the need were ever to arise. Similarly, who wouldn't want to be able to just walk into a medical office and have the doctor see you right then and there? While we're amassing this wish list, how about vibrating massage chairs in the waiting rooms and hot buttered croissants?

As it turns out, we don't live in this perfect world. While our SOSers are diligently lobbying the government to provide funding for a surgeon on Salt Spring, our very own general family practitioners are leaving the island in droves. They are jumping ship because they can work less hours and earn a greater income in areas like Alberta (if truth be known, they can probably earn more working as labourers in the oil sands of Fort McMordor).

As a result, those GPs who have chosen to stay are left with an even heavier workload as more and more abandoned patients clamour to be seen. Not to mention all the new people coming to the island. Add to this intolerable situation the sleep and family disruptions caused by the remaining doctors having to be "on call" at the hospital for significant periods of the week to cover emergency situations and you can see the possibility of a real disaster.

If you are one of the many who have moved to Salt Spring from elsewhere, did you really believe everything your realtor told you? Did you truly think you could settle in an idyllic locale free of rush-hour traffic and high crime rates without having to give up anything in return? Was it your understanding that island life would be nothing but sipping lattes at the Saturday market and texting the ferry corporation to make sure they had a ferry standing by in case you needed to spend an afternoon shopping in Victoria?

As you may have noticed, there is a price to pay for living here. You can't order in an extra-large pizza with everything on it at 3 o'clock in the morning if you have a serious case of the munchies and you can't get the same medical service you would get if you lived next door to St. Paul's Hospital in downtown Vancouver. (Actually, you get seen sooner at our emergency department than you would at St. Paul's!)

Think we've got it bad? What about the many people who live on the Outer Gulf Islands who, if a medical emergency arises, don't have a local hospital they can easily get to? Consider also the many citizens of Canada inhabiting remote areas that lie hundreds of kilometres from the nearest medical care who are begging for just a single doctor or nurse.

How's this for a possible scenario? Let's say there comes a day when all the family practice GPs have left the island for greener pastures. You develop a bad case of athlete's foot or jock itch and the only one left to look after you is the surgeon. When your appointment time arrives, you step into a large, sterile room harshly lit by bright tungsten lights. You are asked to slip into one of those flimsy hospital gowns that are supposed to do up at the back (if one of the ties hadn't already been torn off) and looks a lot like a straight jacket for the criminally insane (which you will surely become before the examination is over).

You are then asked to slide your body onto a cold, stainless steel table and try to relax while the surgeon examines the series of extremely sharp scalpels, saws and drills that are neatly lined up in a row on a metal trolley beside the operating table. He is wearing surgical green scrubs, cap and matching slippers, and you have difficulty answering his questions because his voice is muffled behind his surgical mask.

The sight of the operating instruments have caused you to squirm so much that the decision has been made to put you under a full anaesthetic so that you will cooperate more readily with the doctor's line of questioning. The last thought that crosses your mind before you slip into unconsciousness is that it was only a simple case of jock itch.

Nobody asked me, but I'm not really trying to pooh-pooh the concerns of the many well-meaning people championing the SOS cause. The last decade has seen me in operating rooms more times than I would like to remember. I've had surgeries as serious as cancerous prostate removal and Achilles tendon reattachment and ones that were less critical such as repair of anal fissures (which was still a royal pain in the ass). If we didn't have other needs, I'd be all over SOS like a cloud of wasps on a fall fair blackberry pie.

Instead of trying to save our surgery, how about we put our heads together and try to figure out how to save our whole damn medical system. We need to find a way to keep the GPs we still have and to attract others to open practices here. We could also use a "walk-in" clinic for those unable to find a family doctor. We need more funding designated for mental health and geriatric care and services. Once we cover these bases, maybe then we can look into those vibrating massage chairs.

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