

Seth John Stankus, DO

TACOMA SPECIALTY CENTER
NEUROLOGIST, DIVING MEDICINE

Wouldn't it be great if you could combine your favorite sport with your job? Neurologist Seth John Stankus, DO, who started Group Health's Diving Medicine Service in Tacoma in 2004, gets to do just that.

"It's a natural extension of my medical background and my lifelong interest in diving," says Dr. Stankus, a certified divemaster who took up the sport 30 years ago. "It's an absolute pleasure to get people ready to try diving, or help them return to the water safely."

Diving injuries often affect the brain and nervous system, the treatment domain of neurologists. The Puget Sound area has one of the highest concentrations of divers in the United States, creating great demand for diving-related health care. "Few physicians in the area really know about the medical issues specific to diving," says Dr. Stankus. "It's an unusual and necessary service."

The pressurized undersea environment can influence underlying medical conditions and alter the side effects of medications. "Even infections following cuts and scrapes coming from a marine environment can be quite different. Other unexpected problems can include overheating in a dry suit, or muscle injuries from wearing heavy gear."

Dr. Stankus differentiates his practice from hyperbaric medicine, which uses a pressurized chamber to treat divers with decompression sickness. Rather, he helps patients with ongoing effects of pressure-related injuries after emergency treatment.

He also provides the physical exams divers often need to certify their fitness to dive—either for a recreational class or for their jobs. Dr. Stankus sees professional divers from a wide variety of organizations, including law enforcement, scientific research, marine construction, and natural resource agencies.

Dr. Stankus began his medical career in family practice in the Army, and later pursued a residency in neurology. He holds diving certifications from the Professional Association of Dive Instructors and the International Association of Nitrox and Technical Divers. And he stays current with developments in his specialty through continuing education with the Undersea and Hyperbaric Medical Society.

He and his wife spend as much time in the water as possible, from cave-diving in Mexico to exploring shipwrecks off the coast of British Columbia.