Dr. Mark Ervin: I think that REAC/TS like any organization that people count on, constantly has to prove itself. They always have to be ready. They are judged by the last challenge that they dealt with. My hope is that REAC/TS sort of never gets complacent. That it is always looking over the horizon for what the next challenge may be and that the entirety of the institution really embraces, no matter what happens, we are ready.

Speaker 2: This is the ORISE Featurecast, a special edition of Further Together, the ORAU podcast. Join your host, Michael and Jenna, for conversations with ORISE research program participants and their mentors, as they talk about their experiences and how they are helping shape the future of science. Welcome to the ORISE Featurecast.

Michael Holtz: Happy Wednesday. Welcome to another episode of the ORISE Featurecast. I am Michael Holtz your host, with my cohost Jenna Harpenau. Jenna, it's Wednesday.

Jenna Harpenau: It is. It's going. It's good. I think I'm finally, I've come to terms that this is my new normal. It's taken eight months but I'm here.

Michael Holtz: Yeah. It's normal. It just is and will be doing this for a while, so thank goodness for Zoom so that we can introduce people to folks like our guests today, who I'm really excited to talk to you.

Jenna Harpenau: This is a new one too.

Michael Holtz: It's a brand new, I know brand new person [crosstalk 00:01:51]

Jenna Harpenau: It's weird because we've never met the person before but he's one of us now so.

Michael Holtz: We can see him on Zoom.

Jenna Harpenau: Yeah.

Michael Holtz: But we've ever met in-person. But that's coming onboard to a new organization in the middle of a pandemic, I guess. Dr. Mark Ervin, welcome to the ORISE Featurecast.

Dr. Mark Ervin: Oh, well, thank you so much.

Michael Holtz: We're glad to have you. You are the new associate director for REAC/TS. If I had been thoughtful, I would've spelled out what REAC/TS stands for but-

Dr. Mark Ervin: Well, I can fill that in. It stands in for the Radiation Emergency Assistance Center and Training Site.

Jenna Harpenau: You pass the test. You can stay. You're good.

Michael Holtz: But for folks who don't know, and if you know about ORISE, it's likely you do know that REAC/TS is our internationally known kind of treasurer. It's like the [inaudible 00:29:37] in the ORISE crown of emergency radiation response and you have literally just come on board. You've been here weeks at this point, right? As the new associate director. Dr. Ervin, as background, tell us a little bit about who you are, where you came from and all of that good stuff.

Dr. Mark Ervin: Thank you. Glad to. Yeah. I'm from Georgia originally, born and raised in the Atlanta area. After college and medical school, started what turned out to be a 28 and a half year career in the US Air Force. I'm a general surgeon by training and have maintained my clinical practice without those entire 28 years. But in the process I've had some really unique opportunities. In the last 12 years, everything I have done has been sort of a first, either creating a new job. New gaps occur where we find there, we have a problem needs to be solved and we don't have a mechanism to do it and it seems like for the last three years, I mean the last three assignments, last 12 years, that's kind of been my role. That's been really exciting. It's an opportunity every four or five years to sort of re scope what's important and to learn a new skillset and find ways to make a difference where there was sort of no force before there to make those differences.

I'm coming from San Antonio where I was the chief of Operational Medicine at 59th Medical Wing, where we were looking at trying to do those things, to be able to project a surgical power, if you will, far forward and in a world where we did not have the support that we have come to expect over the last 20 years. A very unique set of challenges of how we provide good medicine in bad places. Before that, I was the medical director for en route critical care at Air Mobility Command up in the St. Louis area at Scott Air Force Base. That was also another unique job where we realized that again, we were going to have to be able to return patients that were critically injured from some very remote areas. We built teams and tactics, techniques and procedures to be able to safely move some brave American soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, our heroes that had suffered for their country and bring them home with the best care available and to recover them safely and get them back with their families.

It was a very rewarding field, and then before that, I think I may still be the only Air Force Command Surgeon for Theater Special Operations Command. I was the Command Surgeon for Special Operations Command Europe, which really had a unique opportunity as we work with our NATO partners to try to lift and empower our providers, but also our combat medics in a number of countries, to be able to provide the best possible care for their soldiers as well as if needed ours. A lot of opportunity to engage internationally, not only just with the teams, but realizing that sometimes there were politics and legal requirements that have been placed on these medics and so the opportunity to interface with different cultures from medical cultures to find ways to get to yes, in ways to empower their medics even if there was no other medic in the country who was allowed to do things we found ways for them to.

The result was actually changing some laws in foreign countries in order to empower them. All new things, all different things they always say, you want to do something hard, do it the first time. I don't believe in that, but it also I think makes me feel very comfortable in transitioning into another new for me. Thankfully this is not a first, but I think it's an opportunity to rapidly spin up and learn and then to bring some unique insights and opportunities to try to take REAC/TS into the future.

Jenna Harpenau: That was a very impressive list of accomplishments in previous positions. I mean, it sounds all of your work has sounded very exciting and very fast paced, very forward moving. What excites you about REAC/TS? When you saw this position, when you were offered this job, what made you say, "Yes. I would like to go there and work with that team."

Dr. Mark Ervin: Well, I mean, I think two things. One, the mission and I think it's always nice when a group of individuals have a common goal, a common sight picture and a common drive in order to accomplish a singular mission and REAC/TS really does have that. It has a focal channel of mission set, mission requirements for it. It's job is to provide medical advice and emergency response consultation, as well as some cytogenic dose assessment. But ultimately it comes down to respond to humans who have potentially been injured by some sort of engagement with a nuclear or radiation source. That common driver of taking care of people that need help, and they have unique injuries that are not seen by the vast majority of providers, either here in the United States or internationally, and so being able to be that counted on 24 seven, 365 resource that when a provider anywhere across the world but particularly within the US, doesn't know what to do, they can call a phone number and they can get answers and they can get help. I mean, as always, it's about the patient.

They say the key to caring for patients is caring about patients. I think that really showed up in my interview process as well as just sort of understanding not only the mission, but the incredible group of experts and just really wonderful human beings that are part of the REAC/TS program. The second piece that I think the mission is important, the second is the challenge.

I mean, radiation materials are not getting any less common. There are increased threats just by having more of the material around, as well as unfortunately, some criminal elements that could try to do things. There are days where, either a community or a country is going to need help. They're going to need experts that are going to guide them in a way to deal with a catastrophic event, whether that catastrophic event is local or national. I'm really excited about having the opportunity to be there when needed. I have 28 years plus in the military, I believe in service to my country and I believe as strongly into service to those people that have entrusted their medical care and their health care to me. On both factors, I think REAC/TS is an incredibly rewarding opportunity for me over the next few years.

Michael Holtz: Great. You talked about how your career has sort of been marked by all of these firsts and new and, positions sort of created as you were doing the work essentially, I have to imagine that this is the first time you've started a job in the midst of a pandemic?

Dr. Mark Ervin: Okay. Yes. That would be true. That's the first time.

Michael Holtz: What's it like starting a job as the associate director for an organization like REAC/TS when A, you're in San Antonio. You're staying in San Antonio, at least for the time being, but having to basically meet everyone remotely as we have today?

Dr. Mark Ervin: Sure. We often talk about a new job, trying to learn all the task and policies and politics that go along with it, is sort of drinking from a fire hose and it's the same doing in the pandemic. The fire hose is [inaudible 00:12:13] a really long one. I think that it has been interesting. I think there're advantages and disadvantages, obviously nobody wants a pandemic to be happening. But it has given me a little more of an opportunity to sort of step one toe at a time into understanding things. I think it has allowed the leadership to be able to sort of foot stomp the key issues to learn and so, as opposed to having to sift through some of the static define the pearls, they've been presented a little bit quicker and faster and allow me to focus on them.

It does give a little bit more opportunity to sort of understand the political landscape and the policy landscape that, if you're onsite, immediately you're engulfed in the next week two, that they're asking you to make decisions about things you don't know about, here at least there seems to be like, "Well, you're not here so we don't make this decision." That part of it, I think has been helpful and less stressful. The downside is that I really enjoy looking at individuals eye to eye. I enjoy hearing the tone that they use when they talk about different subjects and I enjoy sort of learning the passion that they have for things. A lot of that you gain in the downtime. Time that's not deemed super productive, when we all have to knock out a spreadsheet or we have to finish a PowerPoint, yes, we're being productive but we don't learn about each other.

We don't learn what makes people happy, what makes them sad, how they view success, how they view their role in institution. You get that from some of the off time and the downtime, the military taught me. Obviously in the military, when they deploy you're out for a long time and you have one task and you're there for two weeks and the task takes five minutes and then you're done. You get a lot of opportunity to sort of learn about the people you work with. I think that really helps as you try to lead in the future, understanding where people's strengths are, where their challenges are, what excites them and what they really are fine if somebody else does.

Michael Holtz: Right. What are your hopes for REAC/TS? Again, realizing you're brand spanking new. You're still figuring things out and I know there's a lot to learn. I've been with the organization for three years and there's still a lot to learn. What are your hopes for REAC/TS in the future?

Dr. Mark Ervin: Well, I think part of the hope is sort of that they maintain their current presence, but that's a minor hope. I think that REAC/TS like any organization that people count on constantly has to prove itself. They always have to be ready. They are judged by the last challenge that they dealt with and so, my hope is that REAC/TS sort of never gets complacent. That it is always looking over the horizon for what the next challenge may be, and that the entirety of the institution really embraces, no matter what happens, we are ready, whether it's training, whether it's from knowledge, whether it is exploring new opportunities, new possibilities, whether it's through advancing science, whether it's supporting research or performing the research themselves. I hope that REAC/TS is already at the top of the mountain waiting for the rest of the crew to come.

In some of my roles with leadership, my goal was always to, when they had a question, I had the answer and if possible, I'd like to send them the answer before they asked me the question. I hope that REAC/TS is able to continue to do that, and so far I see no reason why that won't happen. They have done that and I just want that sort of drive and that professionalism and that sort of sense of duty and sort of honor to serve continues. I think if those underlying themes continue in REAC/TS, whatever the challenge is, we'll be ready for it. Whatever the next task, we'll do it twice as good as anybody else. That's probably my hope for REAC/TS. There's a saying that, "No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care." I hope that REAC/TS is always known as an organization that cares and by the way, they know a lot.

Michael Holtz: Absolutely.

Dr. Mark Ervin: Well, yeah. One of the things that really impressed me with REAC/TS is what we in my prior life talked about as quiet professionals. I spent a number of years working in Special Operations and I had the opportunity to meet some incredibly smart, talented, athletic, brave heroes on all the services that work there, and universally the one thing that was common with them is that they just, no one needed to tell them that they were doing the right thing and that they were good. They took internally the professionalism that need was needed to accomplish their mission and they didn't need to brag and they didn't need somebody to come by and tell them that they were heroes. I see that in REAC/TS, really a very humble group of individuals that every time they open their mouths they amaze me with the knowledge and the foresight that they have.

But it's not showboating, it's not putting fancy banners out and flagging them down the street. It's, "We're here to do our job and we're going to do an amazing job, and then we're going to walk away and get ready for the next job. Somebody else can have the party." That really is a unique thing to find in our culture. True professionals that are all about doing the job and not all about getting credit for it.

Michael Holtz: Thank you for that. It's a great team.

Jenna Harpenau: It is.

Michael Holtz: Jenna and I have had the opportunity to, I think work with everybody.

Jenna Harpenau: Yeah.

Michael Holtz: Certainly when we do drills with, when we do exercises, we get to play reporters. When they do exercises around accidents and bringing people to the hospital and that sort of thing and so, we always have a good time helping them out with public information aspect of those events.

Jenna Harpenau: I think we learn something new every time we're there too.

Michael Holtz: Absolutely. I think we do, and especially when we sit through the debrief that happens after those drills, but even just popping over for a visit, we learned so much about what they're doing. Again, it's because their utter admins and the rest of the team were very humble about the work that they do. They just do it and they're just there doing their work. We love to talk about it when we can. When you're not working Dr. Ervin, what do you like to do?

Dr. Mark Ervin: Well, it seems like I'm always working. But I think when I'm not working I just sort of enjoy engaging in things that aren't me. What brings me enjoy in life and one point I thought success brings me joy but in a different way. I love watching my oldest daughter adult and be on her own and carving her own pathway in life. I love every time my son takes on a new challenge, whether an athletics or academics and succeeds in ways that amaze me. I love when my daughter does something new for the first time, terrified beforehand and ecstatic and almost overconfident afterwards. I love when my wife takes a vision and turns it into a reality. She's able to convert something that she sees in her head into something that's beautiful and wonderful. I love when a resident for the first time, feels confident doing a surgical procedure.

Probably in many ways, I love any time at team comes together with a common purpose and succeeds, so I enjoy. What gives me joy is watching people succeed and there's so many different aspects, whether it's watching professional sports, college sports, whether it's watching a group of kids come together and build something, whether it's Boy Scouts coming together to build a trail through the woods or whether it's a neighborhood committee coming together to improve the community. That brings me joy. What do I do in my spare time? A lot of times it's just, I enjoy not doing anything.

I was growing up, I'd love to go fishing and three or four times a week I would carry my pole a half mile down the street to the pond and go fishing. A couple of my friends started wanting to come, and so they came and it took them three or four trips to realize that I wasn't putting any bait on the hook. I just threw the bobber out into the middle of the pond. Maybe I might snack something if it swims too close to the hook. But I truly enjoy the opportunity to be out in nature, to be sort of engulfed and all that's wonderful and beautiful and unique in the world, to have a little piece and to have a time where I'm not driven to do a particular task and so I do enjoy tinkering but other than spending time with my children and my wife and my family, I don't have any major hobbies other than whatever that hobby is of doing nothing.

Jenna Harpenau: You've been very busy, so I could see how striving to do nothing is a big thing.

Michael Holtz: Is a big thing. I love the zen of fishing without bait. That's cool.

Dr. Mark Ervin: If something were to jump off, I'd have to do something and [crosstalk 00:24:29].

Jenna Harpenau: [inaudible 00:24:33] surprise you. Did it ever happen and you're like, "How did this happen?

Dr. Mark Ervin: It did happen once. I stopped putting trouble hooks on when that happened because I did [crosstalk 00:24:41] but growing up I used to go for runs with no real path or plan. I liked cross country and I just would follow whatever path and there had been a medley a few times where before the days of GPS I said, "Now, where am I?"

But I do think it's important, particularly when you are busy at work, to have some sort of a technique to be able to leave that at work and it's hard. It's one of the things with our remote working, instead it's to open the door and be home is a little bit tougher than when it was a 25, 30 minute commute and during that time you went from 10 step from the day and still trying to finish the last things, remember the things you forgot to do. By the time you got home you could be free of that and could enter the house without excess baggage. In the realm of COVID working remote, I take a lot of bike rides. I go for walks around the neighborhood, sometimes just go out back and pick up sticks and those sort of things to diffuse and to be able to come back in and not be at work but to be home.

Michael Holtz: I like that because it's hard. I mean, it is difficult when you're, are you working from home or are you living at work, right?

Dr. Mark Ervin: Right.

Michael Holtz: I love the notion of being able to take a break and step away to do whatever that is. Whatever that thing is that helps you step away for a little bit and then come back and hopefully the computers, not all I remember staring in the face and all of those things. Dr. Ervin, is there anything we haven't talked about that you want to make sure that we let people know about?

Dr. Mark Ervin: I don't think so. I'm really excited to be joined the REAC/TS team. I, like everybody wish that COVID was not here and we'd been able to speed my introduction. I think the one piece that I do feel saddest about because of the working relationship or physical relationship, is I had hoped when I came on board at REAC/TS to be able to visit with all the other branches of ORISE as well as engaged with the Oak Ridge [inaudible 00:27:18] university's community as well as the Oak Ridge community.

I am somewhat sad that I really haven't had the opportunity. I am a bit of knock on the door, how are you doing, tell me about your job kind of person, and Zoom is not the best mechanism for doing that, particularly cold. That's I guess the one piece that was probably even if there's one most different about the way I'm onboarding compared to what I would like, that's the one piece, is that it's going to take me longer to understand and see how REAC/TS really fully integrates into the whole ORISE and larger community. I will continue to try to make that happen and if it has to wait until the red flags are down and we have green flags, so be it.

Michael Holtz: Well, we look forward to the day that you can come knocking on our cube doors [inaudible 00:28:17] to let us know that you're onsite.

Dr. Mark Ervin: You say that today but the third time I knock was a wonderful concept about, this is exactly what you need to have your next podcast on. You'd probably change the key combination on the door.

Jenna Harpenau: We'll have a warning system, "He's coming."

Michael Holtz: That's right.

Jenna Harpenau: Well, thank you so much. We really appreciate you taking the time to join us today and just kind of giving us some insight on you and on your new position. We're excited to have you.

Dr. Mark Ervin: Well, thank you so much and thank you for the opportunity and thank you for the support for REAC/TS and the mission. As I said, it's a quiet professional organization, that they do great work, and I think they really are a national asset. Thank you for the support and sometimes it's nice to have someone bragging about you even if you're not doing it yourself.

Michael Holtz: Absolutely. Thank you so much. Have a great day.

Dr. Mark Ervin: Thank you.

Speaker 2: Thank you for listening to the ORISE Featurecast. To learn more about the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education, visit orise.orau.gov, or find us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at ORISEconnect.