

Reflections on Ecuador

By Antony Nguyen

Since this was my first medical service trip, I truly didn't know what to expect before going. Should I practice physical exam techniques? What should I bring? Would it be ok if I hardly knew Spanish? Did I even know enough to make any positive difference at all? Once on the trip, all the uncertainties gave way to excitement and to just enjoying the moment. The trip turned out to be a once-in-a-lifetime educational experience and adventure.

The Hospital and Clinics in Quito:

The differences between the hospital and clinic were obvious just from the outside of the buildings that housed them. From blocks away, approaching the huge majestic building, one could tell it was a hospital. Directly across the street was a small unimposing building that blended in with the surrounding houses and store fronts seamlessly. Even as I stood right in front, I could not tell it was a medical clinic without being told so. On the inside, the gleaming and spacious hallways of the hospital contrasted starkly with the dark and narrow spaces of the clinic. The Hospital Metropolitano in some ways was not unlike any hospital found in the U.S., except in Ecuador they only provide services specifically for patients who can pay or have insurance. At the clinic just across the street, with the relatively measly infrastructure and lack of resources, they do an amazing job with what they have to provide much needed help to the poor and underserved population with no insurance. It was my first time being in and learning about clinics like this. I found it interesting that physicians who work at the clinic are volunteers, taking time out of their own private practices to come here for hours each week to give back to their community. From their practices, the volunteer physicians bring sample medicines provided by pharmaceutical companies to stock the clinic pharmacy and to give out to the clinic patients that need them.

In the clinic, we also learned about the "medical brigades," which are groups of volunteer health professionals (doctors, nurses, dentists, etc.) that go into remote jungle villages several times a year to provide services to the poorest of the poor. But it's not a medical mission where a foreign doctor working with a translator comes to provide one-time medical care to patients during a short trip. The heroes of the medical brigades are local: they live and work in nearby communities, so they are able to go several times a year and bring

sustainable health-care solutions and preventative health education to the people who need it the most. In another part of town, we had the opportunity to shadow physicians at the "Hospital San Jose Obrero," a clinic founded and run by nuns to help the poor. Like at the other clinic, the physicians here are volunteers. In our short time there, we saw patients with varying issues such as diabetes, GI issues, throat problems, and dizziness. For the newly diagnosed diabetes patient, one of the prescriptions the physician wrote was for her diet, detailing all the things she couldn't eat or drink (i.e. soda, white potatoes, rice, bread, honey), which according to the patient, was everything that she eats!

In the upstairs storage/conference room of this clinic, there was a stockpile of drugs they were not allowed to use because the drugs had expired. By law, expired drugs cannot be given to patients even though (this I learned from Dr. Rodriguez)

technically many of the drugs are still perfectly fine since sample drugs have shorter expiration dates—a trick the pharmaceutical companies play to get doctors to buy the drugs instead of continuing to use the samples. It costs money to properly dispose of the drugs, so they sit there day after day, useless and taking up space. What a waste of precious drugs that could

help people! Still, the doctors and nuns come every day and do what they can with what they have. This clinic had various areas, including an emergency room and a pathology lab; something one would expect in a hospital, but unusual in a clinic. Operating solely on donations and volunteers, I'm still amazed they are able to not only keep the place running, but also provide quality care to the patients. Interestingly, they had an area for acupuncture, embracing what many, at least in the U.S., would consider alternative medicine. Apparently acupuncture helps cure, at least temporarily, sinus congestion, according to the one brave person in our group willing to have needles inserted into his body.

Riobamba:

The home visits in Riobamba were an eye opener. It touched me to see not only the physical manifestation of the kids' illnesses, but the poverty of their family and their living conditions. By going to their homes, we gave attention and brought a little help to these mostly forgotten patients who we would not have otherwise seen. There was a malnourished boy with a bone deformity in his arm and learning difficulty. His problems were not severe enough to receive



help from the government, even though his family lived in a small shack with no electricity or running water and unsanitary dirt floors. His mother was so thankful we came that day to provide her son a little care and some donations, repeating "muchas gracias" with tears in her eyes. Still, as we left I felt guilty for not being able to do and give more.

I was really impressed with the school/juvenile detention center, where teenage boys who had been arrested for things like theft, assault, and even rape were being rehabilitated. It was surprising at first, hearing the serious nature of some of the crimes. Initially, I wondered why they weren't locked up behind bars with their freedom taken away like it should be. But as I found out more about the how the place is run, and after I met and talked with the boys, I became a little bit more understanding. I learned most of them were previously homeless, involved in gangs, and simply had to do what they did to survive. It was refreshing to see those boys being taught discipline, team building, and practical trade skills to prepare them to live and succeed on their own in society. It was such a simple idea, and I think far more effective in the long run than throwing money into building facilities and security to lockup and punish troubled youths, which more often than not makes them worse.

Pacto:

Pacto is a very small town that's not even on most maps. It took four bus rides just to get there. But it was in the villages outside of Pacto where I had my most memorable and rewarding experience in Ecuador. The whole operation that day was really something. With only two pickup trucks,

three doctors, one dentist, nurses, FSU med students, and some medicine and equipment, we were able to make an impact in the lives of many children in only a few short hours. We set up an assembly line of sorts, doing medical checkups and physicals of all the kids in that village. One person was stationed at the front to get the name and age, another to get the weight and height, another to get the temperature, another to measure blood pressure, and several to do physicals and fetch medicines. It was great working together in a team like that, each person playing a pivotal role. We were incredibly efficient, bringing smiles to the kids, and making a small difference to their well-being. It goes to show you don't need high tech equipment; you don't need a great abundance of knowledge; you don't need an office; what you need is just a little compassion and effort to do what you can with what you have to care for and help others.

This trip was a wonderful medical learning experience, but it also helped me to grow and see the world in a different perspective. I feel fortunate for the opportunity to better know my classmates and professor; learn about the history, culture, and health care of Ecuador; open my eyes wider to the plight of the underserved; and simply for the opportunity to be of service to others. The thing I'm most grateful for is a renewed desire to give back to the community and help those that need it the most even back home in the U.S. I still need to work on my Spanish, but at least now I have a better idea of what a medical service trip is about and I can hardly wait to go on another one!