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Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine in La Paz, Bolivia

Doing More With Less: Healthcare in Remote Southern Bolivia

So here I am, sitting in my big room, next to my big bed, using my big laptop, listening to my favorite traditional Bolivian music CD. It's been a little over a two months since I've returned home and I still haven't written this essay. Why is this so difficult to write? Why can't I put my experiences on paper? I've been asking myself these questions for the last 20 attempts. I'm hoping this will be the last attempt. I will tell you nothing but a real account of the things that happened when I went to Bolivia. So here it goes.

The thing I remember most about when I arrived was the taxi ride from the airport. The airport is in El Alto, one of the roughest, poorest cities in Bolivia. El Alto sits on top of La Paz. If you imagine La Paz and El Alto shaped like a bowl, La Paz is the basin and El Alto is the lip, the very top. The drive down from the airport to La Paz takes about an hour and the whole way I was wide-eyed, gazing at this new place I would be living in. The view from El Alto is gorgeous. Tin and tile roofs line the hills, the color of the clay, yet the brown sticks out somehow. The vastness carries your eyes until you see the basin, La Paz and these big buildings. My heart was beating faster than normal. I was excited to see more, to get out on the streets. I was scared; I had never seen or been to a place like this before. Even though I had spent three months in Chile the year before, I came to the conclusion quickly that Bolivia is very different from Chile. I remember distinctly passing a huge pile of trash in the middle of a street with an older woman digging through it accompanied by a few street dogs. This is what I was expecting and waiting for. One of the reasons I had come to Bolivia was because it was the poorest country in Latin America and I wanted to see what it was like.



I went there with a passion for helping people and a desire to learn about a new culture and a new set of problems. I was itching for the opportunity to offer my hand to someone. I wanted to help, or at least learn how I could help. Going in I had a dream that one day, in the far future, I would be able to use my knowledge of the world and medicine to bring people and resources together. Despite these dreams, I could never have imagined how much I would actually learn from my experiences in Bolivia.

My first day at the hospital in La Paz (Hospital del Niño) was just the beginning. I remember being impressed by the amount of people in the waiting room and my lack of my Spanish ability. I definitely had a head start with my experiences in Chile the year before, however Medical Spanish is a completely different world. The first time I examined a patient, with the guidance of Dr. Valesco of course, I was extremely nervous. I was doing my best to remember my knowledge of the Spanish language and Dr. Valesco's instructions. Our first patient was a 3 year old girl who was previously in for a checkup after having had pneumonia about five months ago. As I went through the motions I was taught, everything seemed normal to me. When I went to check her mouth and throat, I instantly noticed that she had several severe cavities. She had few healthy teeth left to chew with. I didn't want to offend her or her parents, so I waited until after I completed the examination to say anything about her teeth. As Dr. Velasco was conversing with the parents, I mentioned to the residents that her teeth were severely decayed. They taught me the word for cavities, but didn't seem worried about it at all. I mentioned it to Dr. Velasco and he told me that a lot of children here have bad teeth and that I did a good job on the examination.

After that I noticed that about 90% of the children we examined had teeth similar to hers. This was the inspiration for the oral health project, which resulted in one of the best days I had in La Paz.



I will never forget my week with Dr. Tajerina. She's a fantastic, smiley, loving doctor who is extremely passionate about all her patients. As a pulmonologist who also specializes with Down syndrome patients, I was given the opportunity to see a variety of cases and how the most caring of doctors handle them. The first day I was with Dr. Tajerina a 6 month old baby with a severe case of Pneumonia needed a tube inserted into his chest cavity to drain the fluid. When the surgeon arrived, Dr. Tajerina drew me closer to watch as the surgeon pulled out a scalpel and made a clean incision between the ribs. I enjoyed watching the surgeon's hands, the way he held his instruments and the surprising force he needed to insert the tube. I knew at that moment that with hard work and perseverance I would be able to learn an infinite amount of things during my time in Bolivia.

This feeling carried me through the rest of my time, especially during the week I shadowed Dr. Galindo. Dr. Galindo was the same surgeon I had watched insert the chest tube and so I felt comfortable talking to him and watching him perform procedures. The best part about surgery week is that you get to see surgeries constantly. There are about 4 operating rooms in Hospital del Nino, and if Dr. Galindo isn't using one of them he lets you watch others. In addition, there are windows in between each OR, which allows one to watch two surgeries at once. I became acquainted with the anesthesiologists working in each room and was invited over. I learned not to be afraid to talk to the surgeons and ask them questions. One day a surgeon asked me if I knew what the brown stuff was that he was using; I knew it was iodine and that they were using it as a disinfectant, but I didn't know the word in Spanish, so I tried to sound it out "yyyodiiineee??" Before I could finish my failed attempt, he explained that if I didn't know what something was I should ask. After that I did my best to communicate more.

The one surgery I will never forget was on my second to last day. Dr. Galindo was the head surgeon that day which made me happy because he is one of the kindest surgeons I've ever met. The patient was a 19 day old baby with an extremely large cyst underneath the left side of his chin, completely covering his neck. I remember wondering how to say jugular vein in Spanish. Once everything was set up I noticed that the "beeping machine" wasn't quite as rhythmic as usual. I guessed that maybe this baby had a heart arrhythmia like me. Then the scalpels and electrocauterers came out. They started out by taking off the layer of skin covering the cyst. It was incredible work.



Dr. Velasco was an inspiration to me and I wanted to shadow him one last time before I left La Paz. The difference I could see in myself was tremendous. I realized how much more confident I was in both my medical and Spanish knowledge. I was actually able to understand almost everything that was happening, while being able to have interaction with the patients. Because I no longer had to give 100 % of my attention to Spanish, I could have nonverbal communication with the patients. All it ever took was a little eye contact with a warm smile. Dr. Velasco noticed this and said "Seras una buena pediatra Jessica", which means "You will be a good pediatrician Jessica". This was the best compliment I could have ever asked for.

The next day I was on a bus, ready to make a 20 hour journey to my next destination, Tarija. If you are going to Bolivia and taking a bus ride longer than 3-4 hours, bring a blanket, sweatshirt, hat, scarf, gloves, jacket, and wear layers. I traveled a lot while I was there and every bus ride I took was freezing cold at night. A lot of times the windows don't work and if you plan on catching any sleep you are going to want something to keep you warm.

I arrived in Tarija sweating and sleepy, but excited to start a new adventure. Tarija is at a much lower elevation than La Paz and so it's a lot more tropical with a kind of humid heat. I loved it! The doctora that was in charge of the program picked me up at the bus station, gave me some instructions on how the week was going to go, and then brought me to my new host family.

The host family that I had in La Paz was pretty small. My host "mom" was a 28 year old independent working woman. She was awesome and I enjoyed living with her, but I was excited to have more company in my homestay. When I arrived at my new home in Tarija, I wasn't sure what to expect. I was nervous because I knew I was going to have siblings around my age and younger, an experience I'd never had before. My family in Tarija was more than I could have ever asked for. If it was not for their warm, loving ways I would not have seen Tarija for what it really is. Tarija is a small town with down to earth people who value family and time spent together more than anything. This is a sentiment I still carry with me.

There were no other CFHI students in Tarija, so I spent most all my free time with my family. We would spend our time in the evenings drinking coffee, eating cheese or bread, and talking with friends and relatives. On the weekends we would take day trips together. Sometimes we would go and have lunch somewhere out on the town, while other days we would visit a family friend. It was hard not having any other students with me in the hospital and clinics, but I wouldn't have traded it for the experience and time I got with my host family. They are truly my own family now. I have two little brothers and a younger sister with a Mom and a Dad who are truly great parents. I look forward to the day I will be able to see them again. Saying goodbye to them was the hardest goodbye of the trip.



The medical experience in Tarija was also quite different than that in La Paz. The first week I went with the Chagas diagnosis team to different schools to test each child for Chagas. It was incredible because I was able to see their lab on the first day and then help them with the tests for the rest of the week. Working in a clinic type environment was an invaluable experience. There was a school full of children that needed to be tested every day and one by one we had to test each of them. Being able to help and participate was such a fulfilling experience.

Another difference that I noticed right away was how time has a different meaning in Tarija. One morning we all arrived at 8 am, ready to head to the next school for the day. As we set out it was discussed how we were all tired and hungry still. So what did we do? We stopped and had breakfast and coffee on our way. I'm not talking about just grabbing a coffee and muffin from Starbucks. We actually went and sat down and ate breakfast and drank coffee, the driver of the car included. I was so pleasantly surprised! What a great way to start off the day I thought.

The next week I followed a surgeon who was also more relaxed. He wasn't an incredibly busy surgeon, I only saw him perform one surgery, and so every morning we had breakfast together. I actually learned a lot from him because he was very eager to explain anything I had questions about. I also gained experience in adult medicine. He was not a pediatrician so it was awesome

being able to see a different side of medicine in Bolivia. He took me to the Chagas research facilities where I got to see all the “venchucas” they were working with. A “venchuca” is what they call the beetle that carries the Chagas parasite.

In my last week, I went to a hospital in San Lorenzo where I got to see how country medicine and pediatrics intertwined. All the doctors there were amazing! They were so nice and eager to talk to me. I had the opportunity to shadow a dietician and a gynecologist. My last day there I saw a baby being born. It was fascinating! I was so happy I had chosen to go to Tarija because I would never have experienced such a thing otherwise.



It's March 25th and I have officially been back 3 months. I'm still sitting in my big room, with my big computer, playing my favorite Bolivian CD. I was supposed to have this essay done Jan 11th, but I was in no shape to write about Bolivia in January. The last three months at home have come with a lot of hard adjustments. At first it was the little things: I kept trying to throw away my toilet paper and addressing strangers with “Hola”. I had a cell phone again. My friends could text me and I could text them back. Then it was the big things: I could see my friends and they all wanted to see me. Sometimes I forgot English and became tongue tied. I could drive my car again. I had to pay for gas. I had to pay for rent and worry about buying books for the next terms. I was no longer without company. I now lived with four roommates who spoke my language perfectly and knew my own culture better than I did. I went through many moments of frustration and anger with myself and the people around me. Nobody understood what I went through. Nobody knew what it was like to see a Bolivian child smile. Nobody knew about the love my Bolivian family gave me. Nobody knew me. Not anymore.

Over time these thoughts and feelings lessened. Things felt less strange. My computer no longer felt big, my bed started fitting me better, and society seemed less selfish. I stopped throwing my toilet paper in the garbage and enjoyed every gulp of water from my oversized shower head. Now, I can write this essay. Don't get me wrong, I still think about how a whole Bolivian family could live in my room alone. However, this is the life I was given. This is the country I belong to. It hurts to think of the faces of all the women, children, and families I've seen living on the streets. All I can do now is make sure I never forget those faces. Every day I think about my Bolivian family. I miss them terribly. Especially when I hear others speak Spanish. There is nothing as sweet as the voice of a native of Tarija speaking in their sing song sounds. I will go back someday. There is no way I will ever forget Bolivia.



I look back at what I was expecting to get from this trip. I remember writing that I wanted to learn about foreign medicine, Spanish, and culture. I had no idea that I would end up learning just as much about myself as I would anything else. There is no such thing as growth without struggle. One day in Tarija I was particularly frustrated with Spanish. I had not spoken English to anything

more than a computer in over a month and my mind was on Spanish overload. This frustration led me to write a poem. The result is below:

Some dias I am frustrada and confundida

A lot of things here have sense but they never make sense
I thought I would eat ice cream here, but instead I took it
I also take yogurt, oranges, and drinks

That's exactly right, I don't drink drinks, I take them

I was planning on bringing some vino home with me
but I found out here, I will be carrying it

Kind of like how I never wear clothes
I carry them

Some days there is a lot of sun here
and it makes heat
but I can never be hot
I can only have it

Sort of like how I'll never do my homework,
I'll only make it

This might seem confusing, but I'm just getting started
I can't even count the number of times I've reflexed myself

It's funny, I used to tell people how I pleased myself
liked myself
and loved myself,
I think I get it now

There are two ways things happen(ed) in the past
two ways things can be now
two ways things are for
and two ways I can know something

I know the only way I know enough to write this poem
is because I've come to know it

So saying, this poem will only make sense
if you have sense

Otherwise, you've probably never tried to learn Spanish