

My Experience With The Andean Health Program in Quito, Ecuador

I first heard about Child Family Health International my 4th year of medical school while I was doing my pulmonology rotation in Chicago. I was talking with a fellow Ross University student, who happens to be a native Spanish speaker. I had expressed my desire to improve on my very weak medical Spanish, and she mentioned a program she participated in during college – CFHI. I went home that night and looked for the CFHI website, and as soon as I read the list of countries you could go to for programs, and saw the pediatrics program in La Paz, Bolivia, I was hooked. I immediately began looking at my schedule to see when I could fit in a month long program, and checked the application requirements to see what I need to do to be accepted to the program. When I got the thumbs up from CFHI, I couldn't have been happier. I would be visiting South America for the first time, and getting to work with pediatricians in a foreign country – amazing.

I was scheduled to participate in the October 2008 program in La Paz. I had all my immunizations, plans to get my visa, plane tickets purchased, and bags semi-packed, when I first heard on the news that there was trouble in Bolivia. I was checking the State Department's website for travel alerts every 15 minutes, praying I wouldn't see Bolivia appearing on the list. 11 short days before I was scheduled to leave the country, I found out the La Paz program had been cancelled, and I was left with a decision to make – change programs and countries, or not go at all. After all my planning and excitement about going abroad, there was no way I was about to let a little civil unrest derail my plans. Working with the amazing CFHI staff, I was able to switch to the Andean Health Program with minimal fuss, and with being able to concentrate on pediatrics. Quito was now going to be my new home for the next month, and I couldn't wait to get there.

My first impression of Quito, after a long flight complicated by delays, was of a chaotic airport and very quiet streets. I met my host father for only a brief time before finding my room and going to bed. The next morning I met the rest of my host family – Lorena and her 2 sons, Alex and Martin. I had specifically requested to live with a family with children, because they are such an interesting window into a new culture and language. I was also fortunate to have another CFHI student living in the house with me, which made getting acclimated to the city so much easier. I had decided that I would like to take Spanish classes for the entire first week, instead of starting rotations. I wanted to get the most out of my



time spent in the clinics and hospitals, which would be much easier if I could understand what the patients, doctors and nurses were telling me. Every single Spanish tutor I had at the Amazing Andes language school was wonderful. Lorena, my host mother, was one of my favorites. She was so patient with me and my partner Julie, had interesting exercises for us to work on, and didn't mind just talking about topics to get us used to speaking in Spanish.

My first weekend in Quito was full of firsts for me as we traveled 2 hours outside of the city to Baños. I stayed in my first hostel (which was wonderful), rode a bike for 20km through the mountains (beautiful but tiring), went bungee jumping or "puenting" for the first time ever (awesome – I can't wait to do it again), visited a natural hot spring set up as a community pool-type area (in which I burned my feet) and went white water rafting for the first time (exciting!) That jam-packed weekend was amazing glimpse into life outside of a major city in Ecuador, which provided many opportunities to continue practicing my Spanish in an everyday life setting, instead of in the classroom. I will never forget my time in Baños.



My second week in Quito marked my first time in an Ecuadorian clinic – the Cemoplaf clinic with Dra. Olga Paredes. The doctor and I clicked from the start. I discovered that what you learn in medical school is almost like learning a 3rd language, and Dra. Paredes and I were almost able to communicate better through the common language of medicine than Spanish! But I was so impressed with the way she would talk to her patients, and showed how she genuinely cared for the well being of her patients. She would read Spanish medical journal articles with me, and we would discuss it, something I really enjoyed doing, since I often read Spanish better than I speak it. Overall my time in the Cemoplaf clinic was a great introduction to the workings of a busy pediatric clinic in Quito.

I have always wanted to visit the Amazon, and during this month I finally had my chance. As a group we traveled 5 hours by bus to Limoncocha, where the next day we went on an all day hike to a waterfall, which included a wonderful lunch of fresh fish and time to relax in a natural spring pool. We then boarded another bus to travel 8 hours overnight to reach our boat pickup place, where we then took a small boat up



the river 45 minutes to the Amazon Indian family we would be staying with for several days. During this time our medicine man guide Guillermo would teach us about local healing plants and traditions, we fished for piranhas, went caiman hunting at night, and searching for monkeys by day. And it was wonderful – a no frills, get-down-in there experience that not many people have had to opportunity to have. I know have an even deeper respect for local medical tradition, and understand why some peoples and tribes can be mistrustful of western medicines when they are used to turning to the Amazon for their healing.

For my 3rd week I was in La Clinica de Adolescentes with Dra. Dora Carrera. The clinic was located in the hospital, and the doctor had 2 residents working with her. This made it difficult to get hands on experience, because you had so many people trying to examine the child in a small office and not take 40 minutes to do so. A child was brought in who had been sick for several days, and was severely dehydrated. The residents moved very quickly and confidently, and as such by the time I left that day the child was doing remarkably better. Despite not having a good rapport with the residents, I left that week with a respect for them for how well they did their jobs.



My fourth and final week was one of my favorites – the emergency room at hospital Eugenio Espejo. My partner and I were on the ER wards for the first day, but trying to fight through the crowd of local medical students and residents to hear softly spoken Spanish by the attendings on rounds was not going very well. The next day we went to triage, which was so much better. Dr. Roberto Tallo took us under his wing, supervising my patient interviews (to help me translate), quizzed us in Spanish medical vocabulary during down time, and making sure we were involved in the more interesting cases. Just a brief example of the patients we saw – a homeless man with burns on his back after someone had poured gasoline on him while he was sleeping and lit him on fire, a patient who tried to cut the large wart on his thumb off himself and on whom we put a skin graft on, and the man who was having slight chest pain and we had to use this ancient EKG machine to check his heart. I would bet that if you were to

go into any major city's ER, you would see similar cases just like these, and what a great example of how universal the practice of medicine can be.

In the end, my experience in Quito was overwhelmingly positive. While it may not have been the program I chose in the beginning, I am so incredibly happy that I was able to go and work with the amazing people in this program. I learned that I can survive, and enjoying living, in another country for a month where I am still a novice with the language. I also learned that my chosen career of medicine could be so very different when it is practiced in another country, but it can also be very much the same.



And finally, children are children no matter what language they speak or what their culture is, and I just love that fact. The practice of international medicine has now become a passion of mine. What did I take home from my CFHI experience? A desire to return to Ecuador – a month is not enough to see all the wonderful things that country has to offer. A desire to experience other countries through medical programs – not just as a tourist on vacation, but as someone who can become a local worker for a short amount of time. And finally a desire to get more people involved with programs like CFHI.