

Laura Van Pelt's Report: Rural/Urban Himalayan Rotation, January 2011

My name is Laura Van Pelt, and I had the opportunity to participate in the Rural/Urban Himalayan Rotation in India in January of 2011. I have always aspired to travel abroad and to be able to help people at the same time. When I found out I was able to go on the program, and that I received a scholarship to help make



it financially possible, I was so grateful. My experience in India was one that I will never forget. It gave me a new perspective and appreciation of life. My time on the program was spent learning about medicine and culture. I spent two weeks in Dehradun living with a host family. Mr. and Mrs. Mehta are two amazing people who are so welcoming and friendly. They instantly made me feel comfortable and included me as a member of their family. During my time in Dehradun, I worked with several different doctors including cardiologists, an ophthalmologist, and an obstetrician. Students would spend the morning with one of the doctors in either their clinic or in the hospital for about 3-4 hours. At night we



would spend a few more hours working with a different doctor in their clinic. I found it valuable have a variety of medical experiences because we were able to see the differences and similarities between each physician. As a third year Physician Assistant student, I have worked with many different doctors and have learned certain



skills and techniques from each of them. In India, I was able to appreciate each doctor's particular medical techniques. I also learned a lot about patient interaction. In India, there seemed to be a greater amount of respect for the physician-patient relationship. That difference is one that I won't be able to

experience back home in the states. I also had the chance to spend two weeks in more rural settings in both Patti and Mussoorie. These two places are on my top ten places I've ever visited! I want to live in Patti someday. I have never been to a more relaxing, beautiful, tranquil place in my whole life. We worked with Dr. Paul in his clinic and hiked to two surrounding villages to set-up day clinics there. In Mussoorie, we worked with three different doctors at the Landour Community Hospital. Both were amazing experiences that allowed us to see how people in rural India live, and the particular medical care that they need. As much as I learned from my trip to India, one of the biggest improvements in my life will be how I practice medicine. I have always been focused on helping underserved populations and would love to work in a family practice clinic in a rural area. I appreciate the type of relationship one can form with patients in the family care setting. It is something that I valued before going to India, but is even more significant to me now. The respect and compassion that the physicians in India showed towards their patients is something that can't be learned in school. Not only did the doctors ask about a patient's



health, but they asked about the individual's family and joked with them like they were friends. The value of family and togetherness in India is so prominent that it cannot be ignored or missed.

I think a health care worker's service to their patients should include treating them physically and emotionally. That is what I witnessed in India, and will hopefully stay with me into my career. Treating the patient thoroughly includes



understanding and treating their medical illnesses, but also connecting with them emotionally. If a patient is not emotionally or mentally stable, it makes it that much more difficult for their body to heal physically. I saw this type of care in Dr. Gandhi who hugs and jokes with his patients, or in Dr. Paul who hikes 2-3 hours one way to a village so that his patients don't have to. Taking the extra step to help patients really makes a difference in their health care and also helps improve the physician-patient relationship. India has helped rekindle the passion that I have for helping and connecting with the underserved population. I was able to see a wide variety of medicine while in India. Working with so many different physicians allowed us to be exposed to different specialties. Focusing only on cardiology



for a few hours each day allowed me to really improve my skills and knowledge. Dr Gandhi and Dr. Joshi are two brilliant cardiologists who are also very willing to teach. They included us in the patient care and were always willing to take a little extra time to teach us something new. It was amazing working with Dr. Nisha Gera because she

would call us whenever she had a delivery after hours. We were able to see quite a few births the week that we worked with her in Dehradun.

Working with Dr. Ramola was a whole new experience for me because I haven't had any training with an ophthalmologist prior to going to India. Each day that we worked with him, we would see 100 patients in three hours! We were exposed to so many different patients and pathologies that it was a great



learning experience. One of the days, we spent three hours watching about 21 cataract surgeries. It was such a fascinating experience and really helped me better understand the anatomy of the eye. Working with Dr. Paul who practices Ayurvedic medicine was an educational experience as well. He combines western medicine with traditional medicine to treat patients. One of the days we were able to go on a medicinal hike with him around the village of Patti. It was amazing to see how much we can utilize nature for healing purposes. I really was able to learn a great deal of medical knowledge throughout my month in India, and will be able to utilize it in my future practice as a physician assistant.



India was my first real overseas traveling experience, and it definitely won't be my last. Now I want to travel all over the world and experience and learn about as many different cultures as I can. It would be amazing to be able to travel to different places as a tourist, but even more so as a health care worker. My ultimate dream

would be to work overseas as a physician assistant. It is something that I will definitely pursue after having experienced India. Being able to see the poverty and the struggles that take place in a developing country gives me a whole new perspective about what *underserved* really is. Being trapped in the bubble of my privileged life in the United States hasn't allowed me to realize how much help is needed in other areas of the world.

Preventative medicine and public health are two important areas that need to be expanded on in developing countries. I was able to see the importance of educating people about their health and how to prevent certain diseases. This is a growing interest of mine and will be a primary focus of my future



travel and work as a health care provider. I would love to spend time in developing countries working in public health and teaching people how to prevent certain diseases. It takes whole communities to make a big difference, but it starts with individuals teaching other individuals.

International health has many differences, but also many similarities to the health that I've seen in the United States. People are people, so we all have similar diseases; but slight differences in culture,



diet, religion, climate and location can alter how our bodies handle these diseases. I was surprised at how similar the medications in India are to the ones we use in the United States. Although they were similar, there were additional medicines that were added or different therapies used to treat the disease or

illness. The high demand for health care in underserved communities is clearer to me now. People in India are in such a need for care that they will walk two or three hours up mountains to reach a clinic, or they will drive for a whole day to see a physician. The overpopulation and lack of resources makes it difficult for everyone to receive the care that they deserve. It was really amazing to see how grateful



people are for the care they receive. In India, I didn't see patients complaining that they had to wait an extra half hour to receive care, or that they didn't agree with a certain therapy the doctor prescribed. Most people were completely appreciative and thankful for the care they received. The mentality of patients in India vs. the U.S. was a very noticeable

difference to me. The compassion and empathy that I've gained for underserved communities is something that will always stick with me as a health care provider. In my future, I hope to spread that compassion to others so that more communities can receive the appropriate care that they need.

My trip to India was a once in a lifetime experience. I could never have imagined it to be so wonderful, and that I would gain so much from it. My experience through CFHI has been nothing but positive. Everything was well organized, and all of the staff were so helpful in making my trip a good experience. I am very appreciative to everyone who was involved in helping me go, and I am so grateful to receive this





scholarship. I fell in love with India and already miss the people, the culture, and the beauty of it all. I hope everything I learned there stays with me for the rest of my life.