

CFHI Ecuador: Dentistry & Oral Health Program

Quito, Ecuador

Fall 2015

Final Report



As soon as I heard about CFHI's Dentistry and Oral Health internship program, I felt compelled to apply for it. As a pre-dentistry student seeking a Spanish minor, the program encompassed everything I was looking for and seemed to be created just for me. After learning I had been accepted, I felt paralyzed by an overwhelming wave of shock, excitement, and anxiety. I was about to travel to a foreign country for three months. A foreign country where the people speak a language I hadn't practiced in a year. A foreign country where I knew no one. A foreign country with a culture and values practically opposite to the North American ones I grew up with. I liked my life in the US. I liked being with my friends, my family, my boyfriend. I liked all the activities and scenery Oregon has to offer. I was happy in my routine, in my comfort zone. Why was I giving all that up for something that was so different and uncertain? Thank goodness I ignored those doubtful thoughts and forced myself to go anyway. Otherwise I would have missed out on the best experience – hands down – of my entire 21 years of life.

I vividly remember the entire 20-hour trip from Portland to Quito due to my anxiousness causing me to be on high alert the entire time. I had never flown internationally by myself, so the idea of going through immigration and customs alone terrified me. I was worried about losing my luggage or being robbed at the airport while I searched for my driver in the busy, intimidating airport that I envisioned. Upon arriving in Quito, I was shocked by how smoothly I made it through immigration and customs, how quickly I found my luggage, and how easily I encountered my driver. My driver, the Ecuadorian who warmly greeted me with a kiss on the cheek, ended up being one of the Spanish teachers at the school at which I would soon be taking Spanish classes. I was surprised by how enthusiastic he was about my arrival and how he was already talking about activities he wanted to do together. I was also pretty impressed by how I was able to communicate with him in Spanish during the entire 40-minute ride. I had very low expectations for my arrival, but all of my anxieties were dismissed one by one as it was the most uneventful (in a good way), welcoming reception I could have imagined. My realization that the actual event went so smoothly in comparison to my expectations immediately changed my attitude toward my internship as a whole. Instead of going into my program with skepticism and uneasiness, I made a conscious effort to start off with an open and eager mindset. This decision, I would later realize, was the key to making the most of my internship.

My first day observing at the dental clinic, the dentists welcomed me into the office and eagerly started teaching me dental terminology in Spanish. I soon realized it was difficult to explain my current stage in pre-dentistry education because in Ecuador, dental students begin dental school right after high school and study dentistry for five years, whereas in the US, dental students are required to complete four years of undergraduate study before they can begin another four years in dental school. I also discovered that the combination of the dentists wearing

masks, the loud suction machine constantly clamoring in the background, the strong accents of a few of the dentists, and my inadequate Spanish dental vocabulary knowledge made it difficult to understand what was going on the majority of the time. I left the dental office discouraged, uncertain if my lack of understanding would ever diminish. It was especially disheartening after feeling very confident in the improvement of my conversational Spanish from an entire week of daily seven-hour Spanish classes. I was so thankful that I had observed dentists in the US before my internship because a lot of the procedures implemented and materials used were very similar, which helped lessen my confusion, and I needed all the help I could get.

After a couple weeks of researching the dental procedures I was observing, studying Spanish dental vocabulary in my free time, and practicing my Spanish at every possible opportunity, I finally started to feel comfortable in the dental clinic. I was able to hold a conversation with patients eager to hear about my program, understand the dentists' complex explanations to my questions, and speak with the dentists about professional as well as personal topics between appointments.

Although the language barrier proved to become less and less of an obstacle with every passing day at the clinic, other challenges continued to present themselves. The main challenge I faced was the frustration and helplessness I felt whenever I witnessed a dentist failing to provide their patient with safe, hygienic care. This usually meant a dentist wore a single pair of gloves to treat multiple patients. Sometimes after one patient, they would wash their hands with used gloves still on before moving onto the next. Other times, they would omit this step altogether. This was especially hard for me to observe because it was occurring in a private clinic run by well-off dentists, where limited resources were clearly not an issue. This gave me the impression that the dentists were simply concerned about their own protection as they were consciously

compromising their patients' health and safety. It was especially difficult for me because there was not anything I could say or suggest without insulting the dentists, who were so kind in welcoming me into their clinic. The only thing I could do was carry several clean pairs of gloves with me, so that when I was asked to assist with suctioning or passing instruments, I could ensure at the very least that *I* was practicing proper glove safety.

Confronting challenges would have been much more difficult if it weren't for the support and guidance I received from both my on-site and off-site contacts. My host mother was an open-minded and readily available listener. She would ask me every evening at dinner about my program, and if there were anything that was not up to her standards, she would take matters into her own hands. My Ecuadorian Spanish instructors were wonderful resources for interpreting any interaction that made me feel upset or uncomfortable, so they helped clarify many of my cultural misunderstandings. My on-site supervisor, who also happened to be the endodontist at the dental clinic, spoke with me regularly about my program and eagerly made clinical placement adjustments when I expressed interest in observing certain specialties. Back at home, the Spanish professor supervising my Spanish credits read the weekly reflections I was assigned and responded with thoughtful and insightful feedback. Although I limited my communication with friends and family, I could always count on them to offer emotional support or share in my excitement.



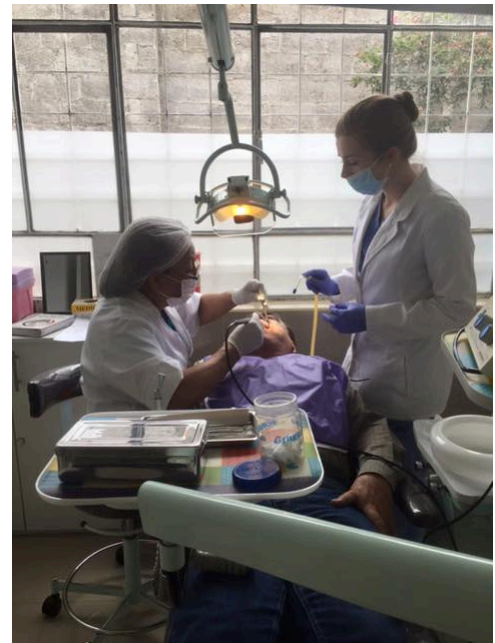
The challenges I faced were easily outweighed by the more frequent highlights. One of the high points of my internship experience was speaking to an entire 190-student school about oral health and dental hygiene. I taught students anywhere from four year to eighteen years of age about the

significance and relationships between plaque, tartar, cavities, and diet and finished my presentation with a demonstration of proper tooth brushing. I was pleasantly surprised by how attentive, inquisitive, and curious the students were about my presentation. Not only did I face my fear of public speaking, I did so while speaking in my third language. This opportunity also allowed me to be an asset to the dental clinic that took me in because many of the students requested the dentists' business cards after I reinforced the importance of receiving biyearly dental checkups. One thing I wish I had known to do before my internship was bring a couple hundred toothbrush and toothpaste sets from home. I didn't know until the middle of my internship that I was required to provide every student with a set in order to perform my presentation. It is fairly simple to obtain these as donations from big dental companies in the US, but this was not an option once I was in Ecuador, where toothbrushes are even more expensive. Having prior knowledge about the presentation requirements would have saved me a decent amount of money.

What I loved most about my internship was the multidimensional nature of the program. I felt so immersed in my host culture because my program allowed me to experience it in many different ways: through my observations in the dental clinic, my Spanish classes, my host family, and my weekend travels. Monday through Thursday, every morning began with three hours of dental shadowing, followed by a one-hour lunch break, then three hours of Spanish class. After Spanish class, I had several hours free to run with one of the Spanish instructors at a nearby park, pick up a snack, take a nap, run some errands, or catch up on homework. I had to be back at my host family's house for dinner at 7. My host mother, host sister, fellow interns, and I would sit around the table, sharing about our day in Spanish over a homemade Ecuadorian meal. Each weekend, the other interns and I took off to explore another part of the country. One aspect I

began to appreciate about Ecuador is that it is a fairly small country, so traveling around it is relatively quick and painless. I would highly recommend visiting Cuenca, Baños, Mindo, Otavalo, Cochasqui, Cotacachi, Quilotoa, Montañita, Isla de la Plata, and the Amazon Rainforest. The more I traveled around Ecuador and got to know more of its treasures, the more connected to it I felt, and the more I was able to appreciate it to the extent it deserved.

Participating in this internship was life changing, eye opening, and self-discovering. I spent over one hundred hours observing a variety of different dental specialties, which reestablished my desire to pursue a career in dentistry and allowed me to identify which specialties particularly interest me. I originally thought I wanted to go into orthodontics, but after having observed an exhilarating four-hour orthognathic procedure, I am now considering maxillofacial surgery as an alternative. I strengthened my communication skills by connecting with experts in my



desired field on professional and personal levels. Furthermore, I experienced a foreign healthcare system firsthand, which will not only allow me to practice in the future with a unique, bicultural perspective but will also help me to connect with patients from different cultural backgrounds.

In addition to professional growth, I also experienced personal growth as a result of my internship experience. My independence and self-awareness were tested all the time. Traveling to a different country alone allowed me to look into myself, without the typical influences placed upon me by my friends and family. It introduced me to customs and traditions different than the ones to which I am accustomed, which pushed me to question the thinking and way of life that I

understood as the norm and never questioned. I now take in my surroundings with new set of eyes and with a greater appreciation for diversity. The culmination of my experiences and self-reflection has transformed my perspective and has sparked my yearning for discovering the world and all its people through travel.

After completing this international internship, returning to the US, and reflecting on my experience, I have some advice for the future interns of this program. First of all, learn and practice as much Spanish as you possibly can before your departure. Take a Spanish class; meet up with a local Spanish conversation group; watch your favorite Netflix shows with Spanish subtitles. Your Spanish speaking abilities will be directly proportional to the amount you will take from your internship and to the profoundness of the relationships you will make.

Before your departure, also make sure to observe regularly in dental offices with different specialties. Bring a notebook along and take detailed notes while you're there in order to help you make meaningful comparisons while you're abroad.

I did a fair amount of reading on Ecuadorian culture and lifestyle before I left and felt like that research helped me make the most of my experience. I read Culture Shock Ecuador, but I also recommend the Moon Handbooks guide on Ecuador.

During your stay, I suggest living with a host family. Staying with native speakers allows you to continuously practice the language, be around the local accent, and learn the relevant slang. It also enables you to be more fully immersed in the culture. You get to experience homemade native cuisine, you have an insider invitation to many events that typical tourists wouldn't even know



about, and you can easily obtain tips and advice from your host family to save you from a lot of trouble. It also doesn't hurt that living with a host family is easily the most financially sound option, and I definitely don't mind having my sheets and clothes washed for me every week. However, what makes this living situation the best option in my mind is that you build meaningful relationships that will continue on even after you return home. It's very comforting having a second family while being so far from home and going through so many new and challenging experiences.

Finally, take in as much of the culture as you possibly can while you're abroad. Avoid limiting yourself with unnecessary dietary restrictions so that you can freely taste the unique food combinations and flavors Ecuadorian cuisine has to offer. Abstain from watching movies alone in your room at night, and instead go out and experience Ecuadorian culture through Latin music and salsa dancing. Rather than hanging around Quito every weekend, consider escaping for a few days to explore an unfamiliar place. Face your fears, ignore your hesitations, and embrace Ecuador's colorful culture with open arms and an open mind.

