

## **Final Report**

Upon arriving in Oaxaca, Mexico and driving through its streets for the first time, I was struck with a sense of both amazement and embarrassment. I had been told that the region of Oaxaca along with its neighboring state, Chiapas, were the two poorest parts of Mexico. Half expecting shantytowns, dirt roads and a general lack of the amenities I am accustomed to, I was surprised to see a beautiful city in all its former colonial grandeur and charm. The buildings were playfully painted in a dazzling array of colors that seemed to radiate with youthful exuberance. The streets were clean, the weather beautiful, the people friendly. My preconceptions had been flipped on their heads. I spent the rest of my first day meeting my host family, getting settled in and enjoying my first taste of the Oaxaca cuisine.

I had been looking forward to finally using my Spanish skills, but during those first few days, the language adjustment overwhelmed me. Having studied Spanish for six years before a few brief terms in college, the foundation existed but was covered by a layer of my own rust and underdeveloped conversational skills. Lacking confidence, I had to think out my sentences and check for grammatical errors before I could even speak. Gradually, through the daily interactions with my host family, at the medical clinics where I worked, everyday Oaxacan life and through my classes, my Spanish improved rapidly. The rust was easily shed after a week or two and with enough practice I was able to speak freely, enough so that several times after conversing, I reflected on how much I had improved after so short a time. At the end of the program, I was able to converse fluently, and my vocabulary had likewise grown substantially. I am convinced

that the best way to learn a foreign language is to be completely immersed abroad for an extended period of time.

My internship experience was in so many ways. From a professional standpoint, the 10 weeks I spent in Oaxaca shadowing, observing, and assisting various physicians helped me to develop valuable medical skills and to learn medical knowledge while showing me the various facets of medicine in the setting of a developing country. I am grateful to the internship for providing me with these assets for the future, especially because few undergraduate students are afforded such extensive first-hand opportunities. From a personal point of view, I saw in the physicians I worked with what it would take to become a dedicated, altruistic, competent physician myself. Before the internship, I knew that it would either confirm or deny my goal for a career in the medical field. After the internship, I can say that the experience encouraged and validated my personal interest in the field. It has intimately shown me all the intricacies of being a physician and has left me even more motivated to join those ranks. This motivation will be of utmost importance in the following years as it will help push me along the long and arduous journey one must undertake to become a physician. I have also greatly benefited from the Oaxacan and Mexican culture which I was immersed in for 10 weeks. This cultural competency, as well as my vastly improved language skills will be carried with me for the rest of my life, serving to make me a more rounded individual. I consider these to the most important benefits of my internship experience.

The most challenging aspect of my internship was my lack of medical knowledge. Whereas many of the other interns had already completed a year in Medical school, I had not even taken basic anatomy. So while my Spanish was adequate, and I was able to

communicate my questions and understand the answers, I had a difficult time retaining the medical knowledge. Unlike the medical students, who were aware of the anatomy and physiology of what they were seeing, I had a difficult time understanding the advanced medicine I was exposed to. Although I researched the medical terms, surgeries, and conditions I saw, this educational aspect of the internship would have been more beneficial had I been a more advanced student in the field of medicine. Nevertheless, I still gained a great deal of medical knowledge through my 10 weeks in Oaxaca.

To ensure that I was a valuable asset to my various clinical sights, I first and foremost dedicated myself to the internship. I arrived on time in the proper attire, and was always prepared to offer my assistance. I asked questions and listened attentively when the answers were given. I actively participated at various clinical sites in tasks which were at my level of training and level of medicine. I was taught a variety of tasks and thus contributed to the clinics as a productive member of the team. These ranged from taking blood pressure and vitals, assisting in the stitching of wounds, surgeries, the administration of medications, to watching over the general care of patients. Through my genuine interest, enthusiasm and dedication to my clinical sights, I am confident I left a positive impact during the extent of my internship.

My local on site coordinator, Dr. Tenorio displayed exceptional support and guidance throughout the duration of my internship. He was very well organized and paid attention to our preferences and input before making final decisions about where to place us for clinical sites and rotations. He was always available for me and the other students if a situation arose and we needed his assistance. Dr. Tenorio also offered weekly lectures on the Mexican health care system and various other cultural factors that affect and shape

Mexico today. As director of his own surgical clinic, he was extremely accommodating for such a busy man. My IE3 coordinator, Monya Lemery also was crucial to my successful internship experience. I felt extremely well prepared in advance from all the pre-departure materials, IE3 orientation, and subsequent Latin America and Medical internship orientations. I was provided with a book on Mexican culture to read before my internship and it helped my adjustment immensely because I knew what to expect, and what was acceptable and not acceptable in Mexican society. I remained in contact during the summer, and there was always support and guidance if I needed it from Monya. I greatly appreciate the time and dedication both my supervisors showed here in Oaxaca and back home in Oregon.

As I alluded to earlier, before arriving in Oaxaca I had thought that the city would have the look and feel of an extremely impoverished city. I had also read briefly about the demonstrations which had gripped the city the previous year. An extremist political group had overtaken the center of the city and battled for control with government police for several months. What I saw that first day in Oaxaca and in the subsequent weeks not only served to dispel my notions but left me enjoying the quaint colonial town. Poverty in some aspects was evident in the crowded beds and rooms of the public hospital and the faces of beggars who occupied the city square. In spite of its apparent poverty, the streets were clean, and the people, oh the people! Their patience had no end, and I was always greeted with smiles, help and hospitality. By the end of my internship, I had grown accustomed to the slow and enjoyable paced life of Mexico. It was upon my return to the states that I began to realize how different the two cultures were, and how much I had

enjoyed the uniquely Oaxacan way of life. My pre-departure ideas of Oaxaca were completely invalidated.

If I had the chance to know something before I arrived, it would have been to bring strong antibiotics to combat any potential gastro-intestinal issues. Many of my fellow interns became sick over the course of the summer as a result of the change in diet microbes found in Mexico. A few weeks into my internship, my stomach became quite sick and I was having bouts of diarrhea and stomach cramps. I was not prepared with the proper medications and because of this, my stomach and health remained uneasy for several weeks, impairing my internship experience.

Throughout my 10 weeks in Oaxaca, my routine never differed. On weekdays, I would wake up at about 7am in order to get dressed, eat breakfast and prepare myself for my clinical rotation which usually started around 8am or 8:30am. My rotation sights changed every one to two weeks and I was fortunate enough to visit: A community health center, the public city hospital, a state-of-the-art rehabilitation center for disabled children, a private hospital for workers of the state, the city red cross, and a private surgical clinic. After observing, assisting, shadowing, and conversing at the clinical sites, I would return to my host home for “comida” with the family. Mexicans eat a hearty breakfast and wait until 3pm to eat their next meal, their largest of the day. It is also a time for the family to congregate and chat about the day's events with each other. After comida, I would have a little time to rest and prepare myself for Spanish classes from 5pm to 7pm at the language school. After class, the interns usually went out together for dinner and other extra-curricular activities. On the weekends, we would often travel around to the many historic sites around Oaxaca and occasionally to nearby attractions

such as the beach, or the capital Mexico City. Upon reflection, because the routine was so structured and there was so much to learn and to see, my 10 weeks in Oaxaca went by rather quickly.

For interns who will be coming to Oaxaca, I have a few recommendations. A good rain jacket will be necessary for the summer months, as it rains about once a day, and when it rains, it pours. The streets can literally turn into rivers right before your eyes! I would recommend bug spray and anti-itch cream, which could come in handy for traveling but also occasionally in Oaxaca. I would also recommend befriending Mexican medical students at the clinical rotations, as well as local Mexicans in general. The medical students can especially help with answering any questions you may have during clinic because often times the attending physicians are extremely busy. For transportation around the city, it is necessary to ask the taxi driver *before* you get in, what the cost will be for him to take you to your destination, to avoid overpricing and confusion. The city bus system takes awhile to get used to, because official stops and routes are never listed. The buses list the names of the streets and destinations they pass through, and you have to guess whether they are going to the desired destination or have just passed it. For traveling out of the city on extended trips to the beach or Mexico City, I would recommend the first class buses which are more expensive, but in my opinion are worth it because they are more comfortable and reliable. Withdrawing money from ATM's is very easy in the city, but traveler's checks also work well. My banks charged me about 5 dollars each time I withdrew money. There are many things you could do for entertainment around the city. Historical sights are abundant, but they have modern amenities such as movie theaters and nightlife. Of the surrounding area, I would

recommend going to Monte Alban and other guided tours around the area. There are the Sierra mountain ranges nearby which are quite suitable for hiking, biking, and camping. Puerto Escondido is also a popular destination for its beautiful beaches and world famous surfing break. Baseball games at the local stadium are also enjoyable to watch for the infectiously enthusiastic crowd and high scoring games. During the month of July, the state of Oaxaca also hosts the annual Guelaguetza, a huge ceremonial event spanning two weeks that attracts tourists from around the world. I found that my host family provided me with everything for, and would only suggest that you conserve the amount of clothing you go through because the laundry service in Oaxaca can be quite expensive.

Overall, my experience this last summer in Oaxaca was extremely memorable for a variety of different reasons. The internship offered first hand medical experience, as well as a chance to greatly improve my Spanish. I was immersed in the Mexican culture, and made valuable friendships and acquaintances with my host family, other interns, and the local people of Oaxaca. It was a time of great personal growth for me, and I am extremely grateful for the time I spent there.