Final Report

IE3 Fall 2009

CFHI Women’s Reproductive Health/Tropical Medicine

Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca Mexico

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*What are your initial impressions of the organization and an overview and thoughts about the kind of work you've started doing; how does the work match your expectations, how does it match your goals?*

My initial impression of CFHI and the people they have on the ground, in Puerto was that this is a well organized program. All the bases were and have been covered from when I stepped off the plane in Puerto to now, having been here for three weeks. A few things stand out: when I got off the plane, went through customs and collected my bags, there was someone there waiting to drive me to the house I would be staying in and to my host family. This person happened to be my host dad, but I think I just got lucky on that part. Also the orientation to Puerto I received was great. Soledad, the local coordinator and my host mom for the internship was great in showing me the general layout of Puerto in a tour by car, giving me a map and then letting me find the rest out for myself, answering my questions day by day. The schedule for work at clinics given to me by the medical directors has also been very organized with a schedule printed out for the whole ten weeks prior to any work being done.

There is also an aspect of completeness to the program; with the Spanish language and medical lectures I am learning the language; living in Puerto with a host family is getting me immersed in the culture, and learning and working in medical clinics is teaching me the way medicine is practiced in Mexico, all of which were goals of mine before entering the program.

On the subject of the work, it has been a great start these first two weeks; I have been placed in a small rural clinic in a town 40 minutes away by taxi called Copala. The work I have done here has been mostly in primary care, including being with the doctor on consults and working with him to diagnose a patient, administering antibacterial shots, vaccinations and I.V.s. It has been great for me as a pre med student to actually have a doctor say to me ok, it's your turn, what do you think is the problem? I have had to critically think in these situations, and when I am right (with the diagnosis and the treatment) it is always a nice bonus! I have really enjoyed getting to know the doctor and his assistant (something like an R.N. called an enfermero) and working with all the different patients and cases.

This work does match up with my expectations as I wasn’t expecting small clinics to act like hospitals and I knew they would be limited in resources, but they make very good use of what they do have. As far as my goals, so far it has been great to learn primary care and be helping the doctor to take patient histories, perform exams, diagnose, and treat patients first hand, especially being a pre med student. I have really learned a lot and the program so far has definitely met my goals as far as learning the healthcare system and more about primary medicine in general.

*What stood out to you the most regarding your arrival?*

Several things stood out to me when I first arrived. First, the airport in Puerto is actually a nice airport and for some reason I was expecting something much less, but it had a baggage claim, a legitimate customs area, and regular flights to and from Mexico City (I don’t know if I was expecting to fly in small prop plane or what). But more about the city and people of Puerto, there were two marked differences between the people of Puerto and those of the United States in general. In Puerto people are more laid back and friendlier. More laid back maybe because of the heat, which many of the locals have told me is the case, but more friendly because it’s the Mexican way of life. People are more willing to say hello to a random stranger walking down the street and if they know you, to talk to you for a long time about pretty much anything. There are other influences here such as family togetherness. The family I live with has the entire extended family living together, which isn’t uncommon. These influences may be a little less pronounced in a place like Puerto due to tourism for surfing, but still easily recognizable.

*What was your greatest anxiety prior to departing and how do you feel about that now that you have arrived?*

My greatest anxiety was the language and not because I couldn’t speak it at all because I could to an extent, but to work in the medical field, a high level communication is needed and I was worrying how language issues could affect what I was going to do in clinic. For that I was anxious and was one of the reasons I went to Puerto a week before the program started to adjust more. However, it has all but evaporated after a couple weeks. I have learned much in the language and it’s just easier to speak a language after you have been around the people in the country awhile and hear how they speak and get used to understanding them. It was definitely difficult the first few days, but has gradually gotten easier each week.

**Question Set 2**

*How are things going at work now that you have settled in for a bit? How does this align with your professional goals that you set for yourself? What would you like to achieve in the next half of your internship?*

Things have shaped up nicely at work over these first four weeks. Being in an undergraduate university, I knew some, but not near all of the aspects of medicine I have seen and learned about while in the clinic here beforehand. The most important of these I wanted to learn and grow in while in Mexico was my knowledge of medicine and how doctors go about their work including how they diagnose and treat patients.

As for the first, I have learned so much of medicine in general since I arrived the comparison is too great to describe in words. The weeks I have spent learning different treatments and what they treat or learning human anatomy in Spanish have been invaluable to my development as a student of biology and eventually medicine.

I have also grown in my ability to think like a doctor. Sitting in a fairly large number of cases now and working with the doctor through every case has my mind on that track as a result. It has also been interesting to see how they communicate with their patients and how it changes in style throughout a consult. In the next half of my internship I want to learn all the more of what I can in medical knowledge, something I think there will be plenty of opportunities for. Also, I want to observe more closely, and grow in the ability to change my communication styles with different patients and understand how communication style affects how patients view a consult, and how effective communication can help or hinder the doctor.

*How are things going relative to your personal goals? In which areas have you made progress and where do you still have some room to expand? What do you want to make sure you address before you leave?*

I feel I have grown quite a lot as a person. Before arriving in Mexico, I had a goal of wanting to grow in my personal independence, and a desire to try new things as a result. This I have done many times with my comfort zone being invaded upon each time, whether by trying cultural practices, activities, or new foods, but I have grown greatly as a person as a result.

A specific goal I had was to form three life-long relationships while in Puerto. This I believe I’ve already passed and I’m upping the number to five. It helps that the people in Mexico want to find lasting relationships and stay in contact with fiends they make, something I’m sure I will take back with me to the States.

I would say overall I am meeting my personal goals, although before I leave, I would like to push myself even more to get outside the comfort zone and try more new things as there is always more room for personal growth by challenging yourself in new ways.

*How are things going relative to your cross-cultural goals? What kinds of experiences have stood out to you so far? What do you want to ensure to experience before you leave?*

There have been so many cultural experiences, I could write a lot about this. The experiences that stand out most to me are during the first week of my arrival, I began to notice the general attitude of the Mexican people of the area as being one of a care free nonchalantness that is so different from the American way of life, along with their views of self and family. It was definitely eye opening experiencing this for the first time when I showed up late to my first Spanish class and thought I was going to be reprimanded somehow and when I arrived, the instructor wasn’t even there and showed up about ten minutes later and told me “tranquilo” (tranquil or easy going literally, but really it means “it’s all good”). I have heard that word a lot since then and have adjusted to it while here as it is how people live.

There are other experiences having to do with the language, learning something in Spanish that doesn’t translate to English, and how to express an idea better in Spanish than in English as a result. The food, the shops and stores, and the traditions like Dia de los Muertos, which I had the great fortune to be here at the right time to experience, have added much to my cross cultural experience as well.

However, there are a lot of things I haven’t experienced that I want to do. I keep on hearing of places I need to visit, and things I need to do and realize I’m going to need another trip back to do it all, but I will do my best while I’m here. But as for my desire to learn and appreciate Mexican culture, I think I’m well on my way on that one, not where I want to be, but close. After experiencing some aspects of culture they seem to have a contagious affect and you want to learn and engage more and more.

**Question Set 3**

*Describe a day in your life – what is your work schedule like, what do you do after work, how do you balance your time between work and exploring life outside of work?*

A normal day for me entails both work and life in Puerto outside of the clinic. It actually took me a few weeks to get a schedule going; although, it’s never really a schedule especially after clinic and on the weekends, nevertheless up to about 5:30 in the afternoon on weekdays has been relatively similar. I get up at either 6 or 7 in the morning depending on whether I’m running or not. I did want to try and keep up a little physical conditioning as I am a fairly fitness minded person in general, and running on the beach in Puerto provided a nice change in workout scenery to say the least. Then I’ll be returning from my run or just waking up at 7, after which I eat and prepare for my day in clinic which usually starts around 8:30 am depending on the clinic. I then go to clinic almost always by taxi (by bus to one clinic) or by walking if the clinic is close enough. I am usually in clinic until around 1:00 - 1:30 pm, but that changes also depending on the clinic. I have been in clinic until three or four in the afternoon because a surgery went overtime or started late, and have returned even later in the day for a birth. So how long you are in clinic often goes with the opportunities you have.

After clinic I usually have a little free time in which I either relax, have a salsa dance lesson or surf (which I do most often). Then around 4pm I have a Spanish class that is two parted: one for learning more of the language, grammar, and cultural aspects and one for learning medical Spanish, both of which have been very helpful. After the Spanish lesson it’s usually around 6pm, and I have a little time to check my email, read a little, look up new words I’ve learned in Spanish, or head to the beach again to watch the sunset which I have never gotten tired of doing. Then, I have dinner around 8 every night with my family and this is the time where we get to talk about the day, and anything else that happens to be on our minds, which has ranged to about every topic I can think of now, from environmental policy worldwide to religion to how my host family is going to start the first movie theater in Puerto. After this great time, it’s usually not to long after that I’m ready to hit the hay and start the next day. On the weekends it’s different as there is no clinic, and in Puerto around this time (in November anyway) it has been just awesome because November is basically a celebration month in Puerto, and I have the privilege of living directly across from the main town square where all of these celebrations take place. Every weekend there are cultural dances or concerts, lasting until 2 in the morning many times (they are also in the weekdays sometimes, which I will admit has made it hard to sleep some nights). Also during the weekends there is more time to do many of the fun things Puerto offers such as surfing, diving/snorkeling, fishing, dance classes, boating tours to see whales, turtles and dolphins, or just a walk on the beach can be quite nice as well.

Managing my time in between work and exploring life in Puerto hasn’t been that difficult. It was at first when I didn’t feel as comfortable in the language, but after a couple weeks that changed and I became more comfortable living in Puerto and started to find all that it offers. There has always been ample time during the week to explore outside of work and classes, and always a lot to find.

*What is your living situation like? Knowing what you know now, are there other options you would have chosen instead? If you can provide some resources for future interns, that would be most helpful.*

I love my current living situation because it is one big happy family, and I mean big. My actual host family has three members, a mother, father, and a daughter of three years who is quite cute. The property where my family lives is a complex of five houses where much of the extended family on the father’s side live. Both my host parents are surfers and are well connected on the community in general, so it has been great to learn to surf and how to live in Puerto from them. They have an apartment attached to the side of their house where I lived that was nicer than what I was expecting coming into the program so I was very pleased with that. I would say that living with a host family is definitely the way to go in any long term exchange especially if it’s your first and you aren’t already fluent in the language because it just puts you in the world of the people that live there and you learn faster. I would say to be open to trying new things the family does which will open doors for you in the future. When you talk with your family be open and honest with them about how you are doing and what you are thinking as it builds trust which is a key thing to have with a host family in a foreign country.

*How is your budget working out for you? Are you spending more or less that what you expected? How much do you typically spend on food, recreation, travel, etc? What would you do differently knowing what you know now?*

Money can go a long way here if you know how to spend it. A lot of what I know about spending money in Puerto came from tips from my family and connections that way. I think the budget provided by IE3 is definitely sufficient for a ten week internship, although I could easily see how one could spend more in a tropical area such as Puerto. How you spend money can differ depending on your host family as well. For example I haven’t had to spend that much on food because my host mom always fixes me such a large breakfast it takes me breakfast and lunch to eat it. Knowing where to get cheap good quality food comes with time, although I can say the supermarket in Puerto SuperChe has good prices and is a great place to start for buying extra food, although trying the restaurants in town is a must as well. As far as my actual budget, I spend around 50-70 pesos per week for transportation (mainly taxis), 140 pesos per week for food, 300-350 pesos per week for entertainment (this is mainly because I rented a surfboard for the entire time I have been here for 3000 pesos, but it includes a private lesson every week also). Knowing what I know now, I would ask my host family right when I arrived where to eat, where to go, what to do, and how best to do it then make a list and plan what and when you can do those things. The host family is a great resource, but you will definitely find plenty out for yourself as you spend more time in an area which is part of the beauty of living there!

*How do you typically get around town and to work? Are you satisfied with that choice? Would you recommend other options? Do you have time to explore the surrounding area on time off? How do you manage that? What do you recommend for travel options? Where do you recommend exploring?*

Travel in and around Puerto is very easy as there are taxis that go everywhere, although they aren’t always the best choice (the type of taxi you take is key as well). Travel in the city of Puerto is usually done by taxis or walking. To save money I have chosen to walk if I am going somewhere in the city, it is a good decision I think because there has always been sufficient time to get to where I need to go in the city and you can enjoy more of the city if you are walking than if you are in a car; this is doable also because Puerto isn’t that large of a city. There are some exceptions such as if you are traveling at night it is usually always best take a taxi unless going very short distances as it is a little dangerous.

As for travel outside of Puerto to different destinations to visit or for clinic, there are two main methods, taxis and buses. Buses are usually (always check prices) the cheapest and all are in decent shape, although there aren’t as many and they don’t go to all the places taxis do so there are limitations. There are many different taxis driving around Puerto and it’s important to know which ones to choose for the most economical trip (paying 30 pesos instead of 5 can add up after awhile). There are “colectivos” taxis with set routes that are much cheaper than the regular taxis that charge 25-30 pesos to go anywhere in or close to Puerto. If there is a colectivo to the place you want to go, take it. They have their routes written on the windshield or the side of the car. There are also stations in Puerto for colectivos going to certain places so it is also important to know where these stations are and which stations correspond to which destinations. But all of this is covered very well by the local coordinator once you arrive to your internship site.

After exploring all of Puerto (which takes awhile) there are a few really cool places to go that are close to Puerto. Zipolite, Chacagua and la Laguna Manaltepec. There are more than just these, but honestly these are all I had time for. Zipolite is a very relaxed place where the majority of the people are just there to lay back in one of the many hammocks lining the beautiful beach. Chacagua is similar but has even fewer shops and outside influences and you can surf there also. La Laguna Manaltepec is a very interesting place where you can get a canoe tour and see all sorts of animals from crocodiles to snakes to fluorescent shrimp at night. All of these places can be reached by a buses or colectivos, and are about an hour to two hours away and cost 30 pesos or less to get to. The great thing about the program is that there has always been ample time to go exploring especially on the weekends, so I wouldn’t worry too much about having time.

**Question set 4**

*How well did your coursework prepare you for your internship?  What knowledge of your field has been most important so far?*

In hindsight of this two-and-a-half month internship, I have a very good idea on what were the most useful classes I had taken, and what other previous experiences helped prepare me for this trip. Being a junior in under graduate school I hadn’t had all the anatomy and physiology of a lot of other grad/post-bac students had coming on the trip. While I would definitely recommend those classes as prep for a program like this, I would say my training in the biological sciences in classes such as molecular biology, general biology, and the chemistries allow you to understand enough of many of the disease processes and cases in general that you see. I would recommend researching or taking classes in anatomy and physiology before you go so it will be less you will have to learn when you are there like I had to, although you can still have a great experience on the internship without having taken a bunch of those types of classes. Also bacteriology, virology, or other classes having to do with disease pathways would be great, but aren’t needed.

However, the knowledge most useful to me that I had before coming to Puerto wasn’t from the classroom.

My shadowing experience in the United States I had had helped me the most because it helped me know what a doctor actually does all day, how they think, what they do; it just gave me some background in the medical field which I think is very needed on a trip like this where you are going to a different country, speaking a different language and trying to learn a different system of medicine and how it functions in that language.

*Describe an event where you misunderstood something due to cultural differences.  What did you do?  What would you do next time?*

I have learned so much of the culture here throughout my time here and as with any extended stay in a foreign country, you learn things about the culture, sometimes through a book you read, or something you observe. Other times you learn it the hard way, by experiencing it first hand and doing something the wrong way. This happened to me a few times but there is one experience that stands out. The first clinic I worked at was in a place about an hour away from Puerto, and I was having trouble finding the taxi station despite the directions my host mom gave me. I finally found it about the time I was supposed to be at clinic. I arrived an hour late and I remember worrying the whole taxi ride to the clinic about what the doctor was going to think and say to me about my being late. By the time I arrived I was feeling quite chagrinned and tried to explain myself to the doctor several times in a row to sound more sorry. The doctor just said that everything was fine and it was my first day so there was nothing to worry about; he said it in a very relaxed voice and seemed just very casual in general about the situation. The next day I made it a point to get there early to make up for the day before, and I when I arrived ten minutes early, I heard the doctor (who lives at the clinic) still in the shower, and he didn’t actually come out until about 9:15 (clinic was supposed to start at 9) to open the clinic. This experience definitely taught me about how “Mexican time” works and although I wasn’t ignorant of what Mexican time is before coming, experiencing it firsthand always takes you by surprise and teaches you something maybe you thought you knew already in a new way.

*What are the most important things you have learned about yourself thus far through this experience?*

I would say I have learned a lot about myself during my time in Puerto. The things that stand out to me are just the sense of adventure and that kind of independent spirit that goes along with being adventuresome. After my time here I realized that I really like to try new and different things and meet new people while exploring these new things. I also realized how important long term relationships are to me, not just acquaintances. These things probably developed a little as a result of living in a place like Mexico for three months, but I also feel like I can relate myself to them as my own, as always having been there, which is why I think they are traits that will remain for the rest of my life.

Another important thing I have learned about myself is that the Mexican people I was living with and around, and myself, have a lot in common. I didn’t think I would have that much in common with the people of Mexico before coming but now I can see how much we are similar, whether it be the increased value of the family and staying together as a family, to being able to laugh at the same jokes, to caring about the same major issues in today’s world. It seems to me that in general, people care about a lot of the same things regardless of the country and cultural differences associated.

**Final Questions**

*Upon reflecting on your internship experience, are you more or less committed to a career in this field?  What experiences have contributed to this?*

Not only am I more committed to being a doctor after this internship, the desire to use my medical skills abroad after becoming a doctor has increased exponentially. This internship has taught me that there is a real need for healthcare and instruction for the people where I was but also in many other parts of the world.

It’s not as if I didn’t know there was a need before, I just didn’t care about it as much. I thought I would be serving my homeland well by just practicing medicine there, whereas after an internship like this you see there really is greater need in other places which has really made me consider what I will do in the future abroad with medicine after getting the M.D.

The experiences that most contributed to this attitude were just being in the clinics in general –being there and seeing the need both in the instruction and application of medicine- and wanting to do something in response.

Also however, my desire to become a doctor was strengthened because of the things I was able to do in clinic such apply I.V.s, do vaccinations, bodily tests, take vitals, suture wounds, scrub in and assist in surgeries and much more. Most of these things were obviously firsts for me being an undergraduate student so they would naturally influence me one way or another and I think it’s safe to say I was heavily influenced towards becoming a doctor from doing those things.

*Looking back at your pre-departure journal or notes, how did your impressions of the host culture change?  What new sources of information shaped your perspectives?*

Before living in Mexico, I had distinct impressions of their culture but no way to give depth to any description of them, as I had not experienced them. I had read on the internet and heard in the IE3 orientation of the obvious differences in the philosophy of time in Mexico with that of the U.S. for example, or how they are a more open and friendly people in general. After living in Mexico for three months, however, I can describe the culture of where I was much more accurately. Now I have the experience to know that in general both of the previously mentioned descriptions hold up in reality, although not in black and white. There are definitely some large scale businesses that run their operations on a strict schedule, and there were times where you could see how the United States and the World “busyness” culture has affected some of the people which make it not 100 percent the laid back, open, fun-loving Mexican culture you might expect from reading a travel book although it’s definitely still the dominant culture there.

*What has been the greatest challenge personally on this internship (reflect upon pre-departure all the way through your re-entry back home)?  What has been the greatest reward?*

Choosing the greatest challenge is difficult, because there were a few big challenges for me, mostly stemming from before the internship or during its first couple weeks. They involved how I was going to communicate with the people in Mexico, and how I was going to fit in with the culture and live there in general. I realized when writing this though, that the first problem really falls under the second (language falls under culture in general), so I’ll choose the latter.

I can remember as the time for my departure from the U.S. got closer and closer an annoyance that had been a trivial thing grew in my head and became something to which I needed to think about and address before I left. This was the fact that I was going somewhere I didn’t know and was going to live there for three months (no short amount of time). I knew I was going to need to adjust to living there in a deeper way than just going on vacation for a couple weeks and living in a resort. I was going to need to learn and take part in the culture, and communicate effectively with the people I was around to have a successful internship (culturally and professionally). I had taken Spanish language classes since my freshman year in high-school, and had tried to read up on and prepare myself thoroughly to live in a different culture, but actually doing it was kind of like a leap of faith in some aspects as I hadn’t done anything like this before. I had to tell myself that I had prepared and was going to make the most of the internship because it was a great opportunity and what I wanted to do. I also told myself I may have a few speed bumps along the way, but I would come out better because of them, which proved to be true. After the first few weeks most of those challenges worked themselves out and I was able to adjust to my host family and living situation, and gained a lot of confidence in speaking the language during that time as well. I would then say the result of the above (adjusting to the culture well) gave me the greatest rewards of my trip, which are great relationships with the doctor’s I worked with and the host family I lived with. These relationships brought trust which in turn brought other rewards such as many other friendships made with the locals (family friends), and more trust with the doctors equaling more opportunities in clinic.