

CFHI Bolivia La Paz/Tarija
Winter 2014
Final Report

When I first walked through the door to my host family's house I was greeted by my host mom and her cocker spaniel. I had just been flying for several hours and was really tired. Carrying my suitcase up to my room on the third floor felt like sprinting a 100 yards because of the high altitude. To help me adjust my host mom made me some coca tea.

Two days later I began my internship at Hospital del Niño. The first morning the other students and I met with Dr. Velasco at the hospital and he showed us to each of our rotations. My first rotation was in the general pediatric unit. This was a great first rotation that got me acquainted with the hospital as well as with typical pediatric cases seen in La Paz and the surrounding areas. The children are admitted to the general pediatric unit first and are later sent to other areas of the hospital based on their specific needs. This allowed me to see a large variety of medical cases within my first few days in La Paz.

My following rotations at Hospital del Niño were in the surgical unit, the infectious disease unit and oncology unit. During each of my rotations I played more of an observing role. Being a pre-med student, the opportunity to observe daily rounds and treatments was a great learning experience. Not all pre-med students in the United States receive such a great learning experience early on.

In Hospital del Niño I most enjoyed the surgical and infectious disease rotations. It was exciting to observe many different types of pediatric surgeries and to learn about anesthesiology with children. During my rotation in infectious disease I was able to see and learn about many infectious diseases that are uncommon or nonexistent in the United States. Being in Bolivia I saw new types of viruses, parasites and bacteria.

The doctors at Hospital del Niño were extremely helpful to me. They made a great effort to explain all of the medical cases to me and they encouraged me to ask questions. The residents in the

hospital were very nice to me as a pre-med student. They also explained situations and helped me to figure out which areas of medicine I was most interested in. Their advice was very helpful. Dr. Cecilia Uribe met with the CFHI students every Monday evening to discuss healthcare in Bolivia. These meetings were very helpful because Dr. Uribe described the health insurance system and healthcare practices. It was useful to learn about the Bolivian healthcare system and then witness it in the hospitals and clinics.

My biggest challenge during my time in La Paz was the language barrier. I had studied Spanish in high school and Oregon State, but still struggled with my speaking skills. During my first week or two it was somewhat difficult to communicate fully with the doctors and my host family. However, through practice and my daily medical Spanish classes each afternoon, I was able to overcome this challenge.

The Spanish speaking skills I gained in La Paz made my transition to Tarija for my second five weeks much easier. My second major challenge came from moving to Tarija. The other CFHI intern cancelled their trip, so I ended up in my second internship site all by myself. This forced me to rely only on my own Spanish speaking skills with my host family, in the hospital and during my tutoring sessions at a local community based organization. At the end of the five weeks there, my Spanish had greatly improved and I was able to communicate clearly and effectively in the hospital as well as in social situations.

My hospital rotations in Tarija were similar to those at Hospital del Niño in La Paz. However, one week I had a rotation at Plataforma de Chagas that focused on the parasitic disease called Chagas. This disease is common in the Tarija area as well as other warmer regions of Bolivia, Argentina and Brazil. Chagas is a parasitic disease spread through a variety of vectors, the main one being an insect, the vinchuca. Chagas is a disease closely associated with poverty and poor living conditions. It was a great learning experience to be in the Plataforma de Chagas, learning about a disease that is very rare in the United States.

Every morning I went to the clinics or hospitals and in the afternoon I went to Libelula. Libelula is a community-based organization in Tarija that provides tutoring and a place for after school activities for underprivileged children in the area. In the afternoons I worked with a group of three to four students to help them with their homework. I also played sports with all the kids after they finished their homework. Volunteering at Libelula was one of the most rewarding aspects of my internship. It was an optional part of the internship and I am very glad I decided to take part in it. Helping the children with homework everyday also helped me improve my Spanish.

While in Bolivia I made a great effort to be an asset to my internship. Being only a pre-med student, this was difficult at times. I felt that I was able to gain more than I was able to give. However, I always offered my services in the hospital. If doctors or nurse needed supplies, I would retrieve them. If there were basic procedures that I had been trained for, I would do them in the hospitals (for example, abscess cleaning). I was able to make myself a large asset at the Libelula site as a tutor. Volunteers were expected to tutor for two hours each day, but I offered my services for an extra hour to give extra help to children struggling with reading.

There were a few things that I wish I had known before starting my internship. CHFI provided me with resources to prepare for my internship at the hospital, but I felt that there was not enough information about the social aspects of living in a different country. More information on the individual host families would have been nice to have prior to my arrival. Also, it would be better to have more information about what there was to do in the cities. There was free time in the evenings and it would have been good to have information of things to do and places to go nearby.

However, I felt that my onsite supervisors for both of my internship sites were extremely helpful. They prepared me for my hospital rotations, Spanish classes, and tutoring at Libelula. I felt comfortable coming to them with questions or any problems that I encountered. They made the transition to life in Bolivia much easier.

I encourage all future participants in this program to take full advantage of everyday in Bolivia. If you are open and willing, you can gain more from your time there than you ever expected. It is important to try new things, which sometimes involves stepping outside of your comfort zone. I would advise future interns to participate fully in the clinic and hospital settings. You will be able to learn a lot about your personal interest in different areas of medicine.

I came into this internship wanting to expand my cultural knowledge and to gain an outstanding experience for medical school. My internship greatly exceeded all of my expectations. It was a life changing experience for me. I fell more in love with medicine, with the natural beauty of Bolivia and with the Bolivian people. My time there went by too quickly and I hope to return to Bolivia in the future because it became a second home to me.