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Winter IE3 Internship
Final Report
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My internship in La Paz was exciting and challenging. For my first day of internship, I went to Hospital Del Nino, which is the largest public pediatric hospital in La Paz. Upon arriving at the hospital, I was quickly overwhelmed by the number of people that I saw. I went to the information desk, and realized right away how much work my Spanish skills needed. I was able to convey that I needed to find a particular doctor for my program, and they sent me to go upstairs.

Before I could go upstairs, I was stopped by a security guard with an intense look on his face. It took him some convincing, but eventually he let me go up the stairs. White lab coats really help sometimes. I went upstairs and found the human resources office that I had been directed to go to by the information desk. She informed me that the doctor I was looking for was out on vacation, and will probably return by the end of the month. I called my medical coordinator, who quickly found me a resident that would be willing to have me work with him for the day. Relieved, I found the new doctor, who spoke a little English and spent the day in his clinic in the emergency room.

From this day on, I made it my mission to improve the adequacy of my language ability. With the help of my sixty hours of Bolivian medical Spanish classes, improvement was easy. Within a few weeks, I had few problems communicating, and no longer was afraid to jump into conversations.

This language development really helped me to take full advantage of my internship in the hospital. I was able to talk to medical staff directly, and pursue personal

interests above and beyond what was made available by the internship. An example of this was the time that I spent with the head of surgery Dr. Galindo whom I met by telling Dr. Valasco that I was highly interested in viewing surgeries. With Dr. Galindo, I was able to view over forty surgeries during the last four weeks. The surgeries that I was able to see were varied and of many specialties including cardiac, vascular, neurological, orthopedic, and reconstructive plastic surgeries. These experiences were very beneficial, because I was able to prove out whether or not I was interested in becoming a surgeon.

There were many challenges I had to overcome in order to be successful in this internship. Aside from a language barrier, there was also a culture barrier, and the challenges associated with living in a new country. The cultural barrier was easy to overcome with the help of my host family. My host family was very welcoming, and I ate lunch with them almost everyday. The host brother and I had many similar interests, and I soon became comfortable discussing Bolivian social problems and politics.

Living in Bolivia took a while to get used to. I got lost a few times, and I had to take a couple cab rides home. My host family even warned me to never go out while it is dark for fear of robbery or worse. Having other students willing to go through these challenges with me, quickened the process of adapting to life in Bolivia, and soon I was very comfortable in La Paz. This fact struck me on a weekend travel when I was very tired and said to myself how I could not wait to be home in La Paz.

Once I felt at home in La Paz, I was able to focus all my efforts into being a successful intern. I took charge, and assisted the surgeons during surgery, helped the physicians with medical forms, and did physical exams on newborns.

In internship, I had the opportunity to participate at several different sites. At each of these sites, I was with a physician at all times, and was personally mentored by each one of them, especially when interesting case studies would appear during physical examinations.

I was a little frightened of Bolivia initially. This fear was partly due to the warden notices that I received via email which stated that no American should enter Bolivia unless necessary. The worry caused by these warnings was supplemented by the first sight of La Paz in the small ragged town of El Alto where the airport is located.

It took some time, but I discovered that La Paz is like most other big towns in the world and I had no reason to fear. This might have been a nice fact to have known before arrival, since Bolivia, with its frequent riots, can lead one easily to believe that it is not the safest country.

Safe or not, I went about my day of internship in La Paz. I went to a hospital for three to four hours a day, for five days a week. For the first half of the internship, I also attended Spanish courses for three hours a day. In between these different parts of my day I had what is known in Latin America as a siesta. The siesta is a lunch time break where basically everything stops, and people go home to be with their families. Lunch is the most important meal of the day in Bolivia and large family lunches were very common at my home stay.

For the second part of my internship, I was given freedom to which of the hospitals I could go to, and with no Spanish courses, attending the hospital in the afternoons was possible. The second part of my internship was when I was really able to

focus on the types of practiced medicine that I was interested in, and the experience that I had was priceless.

For interns, I would suggest that they should not be afraid of going out and seeing La Paz, though they might want to initially travel in a group. In general, I would suggest that anyone going internship should not be afraid of taking charge, and pursuing what they are most interested, because it is then that they will truly uncover all of the available experiences.

Sincerely Tim Becker

La Paz Winter 2008 Premedical Intern