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Program: Child Family Health International (CFHI) Ecuador: Community Medicine from Rainforest to Coast (Ecuador) in Multiple Locations, Ecuador

Term of Study: Internship-Summer, 2016

Final Report

The day of my departure to Ecuador was filled with nervous anticipation, heartfelt goodbyes, and last-minute preparation. Through my many connecting flights I read over intern notes, reviewed basic Spanish grammar, and silently delighted in the adventure that I would soon encounter. It wasn't until I arrived at the airport in Panama City that I fully recognized how different this experience would be from any other I had yet been faced with. Fighting nervousness and unpracticed abilities, I struggled through my interactions with the airport employees and nearly missed my flight due to a gate change announced over a fuzzy intercom in an unfamiliar language. When I arrived at the Guayaquil airport, another student and I were greeted by our program host with hugs and a flurry of indiscernible Spanish words. The other student and I exchanged panicked looks, seeking comprehension in one another, in my case three), all of which are very different from one another.

Because of the unique and varying structure of this program, my internship work site and tasks changed as often as twice-weekly. Prior to beginning my program, when I imagined my role as a clinical observer I pictured myself, white coat and sharp-eyed, taking notes during medical exams and standing over surgery tables. However, I came to find during my first week as an intern that the objectives of this program function on a much larger scale than I had anticipated. During my first rotation at Control Vectorial, rather than silently trailing physicians through patient visits as I had expected, I spent my mornings and afternoons walking through government housing developments and interacting with the inhabitants, limited as my Spanish may be. I am frequently encouraged to interact with the public, under the supervision of my guides. During our community visits, I had the opportunity to observe the public health initiatives that have been implemented throughout the city. Tropical, vector borne diseases such as dengue, chikungunya and zika are rarely seen in the United States but are daily occurrences in parts of Ecuador and a very real threat to public and individual health. My first rotation demonstrated the ways in which public health officers help to educate the community, particularly poor sectors where housing is unstable and subject to high rates of infection, on the transmission of such diseases as well as inspect home water tanks, flower vases and other potential water reservoirs for mosquitos in various stages of development. Although these outings did not meet my expectations of clinical observation, they allowed me to better understand the public health initiatives and the ways in which the community is combatting illness and disease from upstream, and not just at the end of the river. However, since my goals were founded in a better understanding of the medical challenges facing urban and rural communities in low-income areas, I feel that the work is still directed toward my objectives.

At later internship sites, I would find myself in some of the clinical positions that I had earlier anticipated as well as a great many others that I would never have expected.

Although my daily life varies depending on my particular home stay and clinic rotation of the moment, it tends to follow this basic structure: I awake around 6:30am in order to be ready for breakfast by 7:00. I leave for the clinic, usually around 7:30am, using either a bus, a cab, or catching a ride with one of the clinicians. I arrive at the clinic around 8:00am and spend most of the day shadowing a physician and observing their practice. For many of the clinics, where general medicine is in high demand, this entails silent observation of the physician-patient interaction and taking notes for myself. Between patients, the physician is usually kind enough to recap the

appointment or clarify the diagnosis, as well as answer any other questions I have. Like most of the people I interact with while out and about, they usually have questions about my personal life, where I am from, etc. I leave the clinic between 1:00pm and 4:00pm and arrive home some time after that. For the first few weeks of the program I also attended Spanish classes in the afternoons, so clinic would usually last until around 1:00pm and I would attend classes until 5:30pm. Time spent outside of the clinic varies greatly on my clinic hours that day, as well as the host family that I am staying with at the time. During my first rotation in Guayaquil, I attended clinic and classes until 5:30 and returned home between 6:00pm and 7:00pm (depending on how difficult it was to get a taxi that day). Once home, I changed out of my scrubs and assisted my host mom with preparing dinner. The meal lasts about 2:00 hours each night and is filled with talking and story-telling, which is a wonderful experience, but can be quite exhausting after a long day. After dinner, I assist with clearing the table and washing dishes, and prepare myself for bed. I usually take 30-40 minutes every night to respond to emails and messages from friends and family, if I can.

During other home stays, I arrive home from the clinic much earlier, around 3:00pm. While staying with my second host family, the interns did not assist in cooking and as well, ate separately from the family. On these days there was often time to go out for a coffee, walk to the grocery store, or explore whatever city I am in at the time. The weekends are a great opportunity to explore. During my ten weeks in Ecuador, I visited Montañita, Cuenca, Cajas, Otavalo as well as Baños.

The living situation varies tremendously from family to family. The expectations of every host family is different, and each one may require different amounts of time or attention. In general, each of the families I have stayed with have been extremely kind and understanding. Some families prefer to include the interns as families, and others treat us more as guests. I do believe that staying with a host family is the best possible way to fully immerse yourself in the culture and is often one of the best opportunities for improving your language skills. It also allows you to create personal ties to the country that are elevated beyond memories of places and activities. However, it has been very difficult transferring from one family to the other with such frequency. I feel that I did not have the opportunity to truly connect to any one of my host families because I simply did not spend sufficient time with them before changing locations. That being said, I recognize that this is the reality in exchange for the opportunity to stay in so many different parts of the country. I think it is also important for any incoming interns to note the dependency they will have on their host family and home stay. You are accountable to the schedule, rules, food choices, eating patterns, etc. of the family and are not always able to “come and go” as you would be living in an apartment or dorm room. However, I don’t think it would be possible to achieve the same level of immersion without a home stay experience. Both of these aspects should be taken into consideration for the future intern when selecting living accommodations.

Other things that prospective interns should consider while preparing for this program are their language skills, finances, and packing strategies. Having a background in the Spanish language certainly helped to prepare me for the language barrier by providing me with a battery of vocabulary and grammar, but could in no way mimic the real life interactions I would face. I would recommend any future intern to take a language course or review old text before his or her program begins. Additionally, watching movies or listening to music in Spanish might help the student acclimate to hearing the language at a natural speed, which is vastly different than what we are exposed to in classrooms full of other learners. I also feel that several of my courses in areas such as ethnic studies and anthropology helped to open my mind to the new culture and perspectives I would encounter. However, I don’t feel that any of my science or pre-med studies have been of any vital importance to this internship. Due to the language barrier and observational nature of my role here, I do not feel that deep knowledge of the sciences, or of medicine is necessary for this program— simply curiosity and a desire to learn about the field.

Conveniently, the official Ecuadorian currency is the U.S. dollar, making financial arrangements much easier to plan and prepare for. Because I did not have to deal with currency exchange when I returned to the states, I chose to over-prepare my finances knowing I would rather risk losing it than being without it. After considering my anticipated living expenses for the summer, I brought ample amounts of cash, as well as both a credit card and debit card in case of emergency. Although I managed to stay well within my budget, I do find that I spent more (or perhaps differently) than I had anticipated. One such cost includes ground transportation. Depending on the clinic rotation, very often we are required to take taxis to and from our work or school, which can become quite expensive. Students should anticipate spending anywhere from five to fifteen dollars a day in cab fare depending on the clinic rotation and home stay. Ground transportation costs for weekend travel are usually anywhere from twenty-five to fifty dollars including taxis and buses. Food costs have some of the greatest fluctuations, ranging anywhere from a two-dollar almuerzo (caution: although usually fine, at least four students from my group got food poisoning from an almuerzo), to fifteen dollars at an expensive restaurant. And although breakfast and dinner are usually included with your home stay, students should be sure to account for lunch, snacks, and coffee throughout the day, if they wish. Weekend travel can be achieved at very inexpensive costs but can definitely add up with each activity. It can also be significantly less expensive to travel in large groups (and safer as well). I also failed to account for the cost of gifts and souvenirs, which can vary widely in cost. Students should keep this in mind when budgeting their money as well as suitcase space. One of the most important suggestions I can make to future students is to pack small bills. Although this can be bothersome to pack and carry on your person, you will certainly be glad you did as most stores and restaurants prefer small bills and some simply cannot accept larger denominations. I brought the majority of my budget in one and five-dollar bills, supplementing with ten and twenty dollar bills (I highly discourage anything larger than a twenty), as well as a healthy supply of quarters and I could not be more pleased with my preparation. Small bills are always useful and often times in need by other students who failed to prepare as adequately. Interestingly, although large bills can be extremely difficult to accommodate in Ecuador, most of the ATM's distribute bills in twenties and fifties. Ultimately, I am very pleased with my financial preparation, particularly after witnessing some of the other interns' struggles and misfortunes. I overestimated the amount of money I would spend, brought mostly one and five-dollar bills, brought two different forms of back up money and planned my spending beforehand. Although it is impossible to anticipate exactly how and in what quantities you will spend your money on excursions such as these, the best possible strategy is preparation and thoughtfulness.

Interestingly, although I spent the greatest amount of time and care preparing my suitcase for the trip, this turned out to be the greatest burden and annoyance of all. Despite the many warnings I received to "pack light", I chose to be over-prepared rather than under-prepared. Ultimately, I am glad I packed what I did because of the many items that did become useful, but I constantly wished I had had a better idea of what I would be needing before my departure. In general, I urge students to keep in mind that laundry is available every week; to pack basic, plain colored items; and that most of the work day is spent in scrubs.

Students should also keep in mind that while they are abroad they are both guests and workers and should do their best to contribute to their homestays and work sites. The CFHI program is deeply involved with the community in which it is based. With many eager, well-meaning students seeking superficial opportunities in 'voluntourism', I worried about the impact of my presence during my observation. I was comforted by the reception of my host and the assurance that, although we are only here to observe, our participation provides economic benefits to the community through our program fees, home stay costs, technical and medical equipment, as well as the many ways in which we patron the city throughout our stay. Student should strive to be received as polite, respectful and enthusiastic about their work.

Ecuador will never fail to present opportunities for new experiences, personal growth and exploration. This program is unique in its flexible design that allows students to visit many parts of the country as well as a diversity of work site locations, specialties and community interactions. The program coordinators are boundless in their ability to answer questions, make clarifications and even modifications to the program in order to make it the safest, most enjoyable learning experience for each individual.

For me, the variability I experienced was one of the programs greatest assets, as well as one its greatest struggles. Because the location of my home stay as well as work rotations would change so frequently, it was always difficult to consider myself truly 'settled'. However, I gradually became more accustomed to the uncertainty, frequent changes in schedule, and unpredictable account of time. After time, I became greater prepared to expect the unexpected, and therefore able to handle the challenges I face with each new rotation. My abilities to cope with uncertainty, adapt when necessary, and communicate any questions with confidence and directness, have all improved since the start of this program. I also found a growing confidence and independence through my improving abilities in language and unescorted travel. Although my foreign appearance, flawed language skills, and gender position (being a female), often put me at greater risk for unsafe incidents, I feel that the small independences I have gained during my time in this program have helped me to grow as a competent traveler and confident woman. By the end of my ten weeks abroad I felt much more comfortable navigating the bus terminal, taking a taxi or exploring on my own- even preferring my solo travel experiences for the opportunities to meet new people, challenge my language skills and take on new adventures with complete self-reliance. My greatest reward has been to face the unknown and find myself the better on the other side. My ability to overcome the unexpected was an uncertainty in which I feel I have proven myself and now feel confident in my ability to confront other unknowns, an entire world of unknown, with great capability.