

## **IE3 Final Report: CFHI Urban & Rural Comparative Health, Ecuador**

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After three days of orientation and tours of the Quito, I was very ready to begin the medical rotations and start my first day at the clinics and hospitals. Having very little medical exposure before this internship, I really didn't know what to expect on my first day. I began in a rotation in Internal Medicine at a public, social security hospital that provided care to the lower and middle classes. We met our physician and before walking into the first patient room, he told us to be prepared because this was something we would never again see in the course of our professional development. The first patient was an elderly woman who suffered from a prolapsed uterus that was infected with tapeworm larvae. The nurse removed the bandages and we could literally see the larvae crawling around. I could only imagine the level of poverty that would have caused this woman to suffer from a prolapsed uterus long enough for it to become infected with tapeworms. That morning continued to be a memorable one as the severity of diabetes was revealed to me in the cases of diabetic foot so advanced that the tissue had necrotized down to the bones and tendons. Furthermore, as if my morning wasn't already exciting enough, I also had my first fainting experience during the gruesome removal of bone marrow from an elderly man's sternum. Heading home after that first morning, I could hardly believe what I had seen and experienced in only my first 4 hours of the internship...and I had 9.5 weeks to go!

My lack of medical knowledge and medical experience was a definite challenge at times. From the embarrassing event to fainting on the first day during a minor procedure to not understanding the medical terminology that the physicians used, I often envied the medical students that I was with and the medical comprehension that translated so easily across

languages. For a few weeks I was also terrified of fainting again and I wondered if I could even consider medicine as a future career with my very weak stomach. However, I think one of the reasons why my internship was so successful is because I never let my lack of medical knowledge hold me back. Starting with my first day in the hospitals, I took advantage of my proficient conversational (not medical) Spanish abilities and tried to ask whatever questions I could think of whenever possible. I found my peers (many of them medical students) to be excellent resources and in general the physicians, nurses and medical assistants that I worked with were extremely helpful and loved teaching, no matter how stupid I'm sure my questions sounded. I took notes every day and often looked things up later if I still didn't understand. In this way, the limited medical knowledge that I had at the beginning of the internship only illustrates the immense amount that I learned through the course of my 10 weeks working in the clinics and hospitals. By the fifth week I actually had the opportunity to scrub in and assist during a surgery which, as a third year undergraduate student, was an unbelievable, momentous experience for me. And I never did faint again!

Professionally, the benefits of this internship were many. I observed and learned from so many cases that my medical knowledge has expanded exponentially. Also, not only was I able to observe surgeries, but I also was able to scrub in and assist during surgeries a number of times which is something that would be impossible for an undergraduate student to do in the US. As a bioengineering major, it was an extremely valuable experience to witness the lack of technology and recognize first-hand the importance of affordable, appropriate medical technology. Although I came with an advanced level of Spanish study, my Spanish improved greatly in ways that it never could have in the classroom and I have gained much more confidence in my ability to speak and understand the language. Most importantly, though, spending three months shadowing

physicians really gave me a better understanding of healthcare, medicine and the daily professional lives of physicians. Before this internship, I really wasn't too sure if I wanted to go to medical school or be a physician as my future career. However, this internship not only helped me understand what a career as a physician would entail but also was extremely affirming in that healthcare is the best future career path for me.

There are certain lessons that I learned in Ecuador that will always stay with me. I was so amazed with the international political awareness of the US: almost everyone I spoke to in Ecuador knew about the upcoming presidential election, the names of the candidates and their positions, as well as US issues such as the war in Iraq, the economy, etc. Yet it wasn't just that they knew about what happened in the US, but they had a genuine interest because it affected them too. It was like having that feeling that someone is watching you then turning around and realizing that they've been watching you the whole time. Every day the Quito newspaper had at least one large article concerning the US. Before my study abroad, I had no idea the extent of the US's global impact, nor of the global awareness of our country. It has changed the way I view our political leaders and our international policies, and I hope to be as internationally aware as my Ecuadorean friends are.

In terms of how I have changed over the course of the internship, sometimes I think I might have adjusted too fast to Ecuadorean life and hence wasn't affected as much by the cultural differences. But although the cultural differences do exist (and I have adopted some), I personally found it more fascinating to recognize the similarities between US and Ecuador. There is something about the cross-cultural commonalities of people and relationships that I just find beautiful. For example, hearing my host mom scold my host brother for staying out too late, watching my host cousin tease my host brother when a girl called him on the phone, families

playing soccer at the park, or a toddler crying when her popsicle fell off the stick all brought a certain warmth to my heart and a connection to these people. I'll always remember making friends with Elisa, the girl in the seat next to me on the bus ride to Mindo, sharing our stories and listening as she told me how difficult it was for her to break up with her boyfriend. Or my last week there, watching new mothers greet their newborn babies with kisses, smiles and baby talk. It may have been in a different language, but the sentiment was universal. Maybe I travelled to a different country and a different hemisphere to learn about a different culture and practice a different language, but I think additionally there was a huge amount that I learned about our similarities. And isn't that what really matters?