

# Guatemala Internship Report

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Volunteering for a month at both Santo Domingo Xenacoj Health Center and Obras Sociales Santo Hermano Pedro Hospital in Guatemala was truly an extraordinary experience for me not only as a pre-medical student, but also as the Guatemalan citizen I am. I was born in Guatemala City and lived there until age fifteen, after which I moved to the United States to pursue a better education. Fortunately, Cornell College afforded me the remarkable opportunity to see my home country in a different light, to be of service to the people of a rural community living in poverty, something that not even my friends and relatives living in Guatemala have ever engaged in.

During the three weeks I spent at Santo Domingo Xenacoj Health Center, I learned many things from Drs. Bryon Crocker and Henry Coy, nurses Julia and Lilia, and head nurse/administrator Joakin Velazquez, who were all very open and welcoming. Each week I was assigned to work a different area of the clinic. For example, the first week I spent at the pre-consult room, taking height, weight, temperature, and blood pressure of the patients. The second week, I shadowed nurse Julia while she gave B complex injections to women, gave immunization injections to children, and held consults for family planning. The third week was the busiest. Joakin taught me how to perform a growth assessment of children five years old or younger, and then I went with a group of people from the clinic as well as from the government performing these from house to house around Santo Domingo Xenacoj in order to keep track of malnourishment and normal development of the community. Also, I was under

supervised charge of the pharmacy, dispensing medicine following the prescriptions and checking out patients. I have to say, initially it was really hard to make out what medicine the doctors were prescribing, but after I became familiar with the drugs the clinic handled it all became easier. During all three weeks, it was very helpful and interesting to be called by Dr. Byron Crocker when he had patients with conditions such as oral moniliasis, pediculosis, hepatic hemangioma, neonatal ictericia, sarcoptiosis, and impetigo. He would explain to me the basics as he showed me the manifestations of the conditions and then ask me to read and learn on my own about them.

It was no surprise to find that no one in the clinic spoke English, but what I did not fully expect was to find that on top of my native Spanish, it would have served me well to also speak Kaqchikel, a Maya language, which most of the staff and patients prefer over Spanish. Early on, Dr. Crocker was kind enough to arrange a meeting with the mayor of Santo Domingo Xenacoj. During our visit with the mayor, I learned that this free health center is co-funded by the department of Sacatepéquez (a department in Guatemala is the equivalent to a state in the United States) and the national government of Guatemala. It was sad to hear that, according to the mayor, the funding from the national government is very limited and often arrives late, so much that sometimes the doctors and staff have to forgo part of their due salaries or the clinic has shortages of even the most basic needs such as gauze and sanitizing supplies. By the end of my volunteering period at Santo Domingo Xenacoj Health Center, I had realized three things: that this health center helps about forty to fifty patients per day, that the overwhelming majority of patients at the clinic are indigenous Kaqchikel Maya, and that only women and children seem to come to the clinic. On my last day, the doctors and nurses were so kind as to

throw a surprise goodbye lunch for the volunteers, which made us all feel appreciated and surely we'll always be thankful for.

I also spent a week volunteering at Obras Sociales Santo Hermano Pedro, a hospital which has a great deal of volunteers on a regular basis, most of them from the United States or Europe. During that week, I helped out in the elderly women house and the special needs house. I also shadowed an internal medicine doctor who treated kids who had ear reconstruction surgery, as well as pre-surgery consult of men and women younger than thirty. Dr. Ernesto Chocoj was very patient explaining to me the details and charts of every case as he was seeing the patients, and he also allowed me to take their blood pressure.

During my time in Guatemala, I found myself constantly explaining to doctors that I was not in medical school yet but that I was a "pre-med" student. They were all surprised to hear that studying medicine in Guatemala entitles a completely different program of study from that of the United States. In Guatemala medical training begins immediately after completing high school, and since there is no such thing as the required four undergraduate years, medical school lasts seven to eight years plus specialization. It was interesting to hear the path I would have taken if I had never moved from Guatemala.