Medical School Physicians Battle Pediatric Disorders in Guatemala

IUSM participants establish personal as well as professional relationships

Four professionals from the Indiana University School of Medicine in Indianapolis (IUSM) joined forces with doctors and nurses from Vanderbilt University and New York City hospitals to do battle against pediatric urologic disorders in Antigua, the former capital of Guatemala. The team worked 12-hour days over the course of the week-long crusade, examining a total of 65 Guatemalan children and performing surgery on more than half of them.

IUSM’s contribution to the 19-member team included Kevin P. McLaughlin, M.D., a Fellow in Pediatric Urology at Riley Hospital, Mark C. Adams, M.D., Assistant Professor of Urology, Staff Pediatric Urologist at Riley; Vicken Chalian, M.D., Resident, Urology, IU School of Medicine; and Janice Kaefer, RN, BSN, IU Hospitals.

The project was organized by Fundación Pediatra, a private group of urologists who invited Healing the Children Northeast, Inc., a Division of Medical Missions Abroad, to come to Guatemala. Healing the Children Northeast has been involved in such projects in Central and South America for 11 years, according to Angeles Glick, Executive Director of Healing the Children Northeast. This is the third year for the pediatric urologic program in Guatemala, Glick said.

Preparation for the project is a year-round affair. Throughout the year, participating nurses from Vanderbilt collect and resterilize unused medical supplies that would otherwise be discarded. “The Vanderbilt nurses essentially outfit the entire trip,” McLaughlin said. “Over the course of the year, they scavenged something like 60 or 70 boxes of medical supplies. And then we bring with us our own surgical instruments.”

Dr. Gonzalo Calvimontes Foranini, Coordinator of Special Programs for the Fundación Pediatra Guatemalteca, provided support services to the team, ranging from practical matters such as where to eat and how to get around, to substantive information about the people, their culture, and their expectations from the project. Dr. Calvimontes also made certain that post-operative care was well organized, providing proper follow-up with good nurse support.

The program became more than a medical mission as team members developed relationships with the patients and their families. “One of the families took us out to dinner one of the nights we were down there,” McLaughlin said. “It was an enormous gesture of appreciation,” he added, noting the relative expense of such an action for a lower-income Guatemalan family.

McLaughlin also tells the story of how the family of one of their patients actually hunted them down on their last night to thank them. “While we were at dinner in Guatemala City, the family of one of the patients that we had operated on found us in the restaurant and gave a couple of small gifts to Vicken Chalian, who had befriended their son,” McLaughlin relates. “Vicken had played with him and clowned around with him and laughed with him, and his family really appreciated it.” Some of the families even saw the group off at the airport.

All the participants had to fund the trip themselves and take vacation time to participate. Speaking for the entire IU contingent, McLaughlin says it was well worth the sacrifice. “It’s a tremendously valuable experience. Some of the things we did are truly one of a kind operations.” McLaughlin also said all the IU team members appreciated the opportunity to establish lasting professional relationships with their colleagues from Vanderbilt and Guatemala.