

Boca Chica, Dominican Republic 1987

By Amy Shellabarger, Oak Leaves, March 12, 1987

Gripe (gripe, flu), mareo (dizziness), dolor de la cabeza (headache), parásitos (parasites), and Pepto Bismol (foreign aid), were all popular terms to describe this year's trip to the Dominican Republic. For many, this was the first experience outside the country and this little Caribbean island proved a challenge for even those expert travelers. This was my second Jan. Term trip to the Dominican Republic, and I'm always surprised how friendly these people are toward us.

The trip was conducted by Dr. Edward (Eduardo) Miller and his wife Martha. There were nine Manchester students and Keim Houser, a Manchester graduate and obstetrician/gynecologist from South Bend, Jane Bridges, a fourth year student of medicine at Indiana University, Michael Kastner, a dentist from Toledo Ohio, and his wife, Kim, a dental hygienist.

We loaded up our gear plus 15 boxes of medical/dental supplies and said goodbye to life as we know it in the U.S. We stayed in a summer house about a hundred yards from the beach, and I must admit that we were blessed with more comforts than in previous years. Our job was working in a clinic run by Franciscan nuns who also had a home for elderly women. These nuns took us in as their children and provided snacks during break time at the clinic and general understanding when we either didn't understand or had problems with patients. During the year there is a doctor who works five mornings a week and a dentist who comes in once a week to do extractions and fillings.

We charged no fee for consultation and many people came looking for vitamins and just a chance to see an American doctor. Some mornings there would be a line at 3 am to get a ticket so they could be one off the 100 patients we would see that day.

Everybody had the chance to work in different areas of the clinic. We usually rotated working in the pharmacy, dental and medical divisions. We helped the doctors with pelvic exams, took blood pressures and listened to congested chests. Everyone counted pills in the pharmacy and got to explain "una pastilla cada cuatro horas" (one tablet every four hours) and other dosage requirements. One of the more challenging jobs was taking patient histories. This required lots of patience, especially for those without any knowledge of Spanish. Armed with a few general questions about age, name and "What's the matter with you?" and lots of hand motions, some of the most interesting communication took place.

Rebecca Copp, biology/chemistry major found that just plunging in and trying to pronounce numbers and names was the best way to make people laugh.

Andrea Weed, also a biology/chemistry major, did tooth brush instruction in English but used the loud and slow speaking method and somehow got the message across in her demonstration.

The dental clinic was mainly devoted to school-age children and emphasis on brushing was stressed because the majority of the children already had craters where healthy molars should have been. We took over 1,000 toothbrushes and saw about 100 patients. We had the opportunity to do extractions, novocaine injections, and fillings. We saw root canals and more blood than one cares to remember.

We ate dinners in a Dominican home and found out how hospitable those people are. The evening fellowship time with this family, neighbors, and an assortment of dogs, chickens and lizards was a particular highlight of the trip.

Tourism is beginning to boom in Boca Chica, the village where we worked. We often heard more French than Spanish, as French Canadians frequent the town with one of the best beaches on the island. Tourism, however, brings a mixed bag of tricks: on the one hand, there's lots of money brought into the economy, but on the other hand, there's prostitution, and we saw our share of VD and teenage pregnancies at the clinic. Although the influx of different and conflicting cultural norms has changed some aspects of the town, the people seem to accept a double standard which allows tourists to wear shorts and bikinis while the Dominicans themselves still observe more modest rules of dress.

Drinking water is not safe and many of us found that out the hard way after spending sleepless nights in the baño (bathroom). I think most of the people on the trip gained a new appreciation for the things we take for granted. We got to see how our country "helps" fund weapons but not medical programs. I saw public hospitals where children didn't even have medicine and where mothers were giving birth on rusty galvanized steel tables.

I came back a different person, and I feel I have a bond with those people who are no longer nameless. They are my friends Manolo, Apolina and Santiago.

You, as Manchester students, have the opportunity to take this kind of trip. Don't let the "I don't have enough money" excuse make your decision for you. There are loans, and this investment is one that has lots more payback than an IRA. Take the challenge and experience life outside your own backyard. No experience necessary, just take a heap of love and you'll find you'll receive a lot more than you could have ever imagined.