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Manchester University

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Students helped provide care for patients that cannot afford the cost treatment while having new cultural experiences.  
Photos provided by Dr. Osborne

## Students Travel to Guatemala for Annual Medical Practicum, Provide Free Care

**Madison Cunningham**

Over January session, 12 Manchester students along with a small group of health care providers ventured to Baja Verapaz, Guatemala, for 20 days (about three weeks). This trip was a part of Manchester's annual Medical Practicum, which helps to provide free care to patients that cannot afford the cost of treatment.

The participating health care providers, with help from the students, were able to treat roughly 1,651 patients; of those, approximately 1,452 patients received medical care while the remaining 199 patients received dental care.

The supplies were funded by 48 donors, who were able to raise over \$20,000 that went toward medicine and supplies. One donor, Manchester Family Dentistry, gave all of the medical supplies for the dental care that was provided.

In order to get all 19 clinic bags to Guatemala, participants traveling had to lend a helping hand. "Every person had two checked bags with them on the plane," said Dr. Jeff Osborne, professor of Chemistry and director of the Medical Practicum. "One was for their personal stuff, and one was for our clinic stuff." From the plane, they put the supplies in a big truck, commuting down narrow, rocky roads to reach the remote destination.

In the remote areas of Guatemala, there was no clean drinking water available to the group, only a couple spigots of unpurified water. Many times, there was no electricity either. "We had to fill up big barrels and take baths out of the barrels," Osborne said. "We had electricity out of one place, but only a couple hours a night."

The group also had many different cultural experiences that generated new learning opportunities and called for problem-solving techniques. For example, the group was challenged by a language barrier.

Many of the patients they cared for spoke different types of Mayan languages, mainly Q'eqchi and Poqomchi'. However, this small obstacle did not stop the group from providing care. To communicate with them, interpreters were used to translate from Mayan to Spanish and from Spanish to English.

Kora Beasley, a student who attended the Medical Practicum, found the differences in culture to be one of the most challenging parts of the trip. "Even in spaces where both the patient and I spoke Spanish, or both spoke English, it was difficult to understand what their practices were, how open they were to Western medicine, (and) what their accessibility was," she said.

Beasley also found the language barrier to be rather difficult. "While some patients spoke Spanish, many of them spoke Mayan languages as well," she said. "I was able to translate and speak some Spanish with patients but not on a professional level only on an informal level, otherwise I would need translators."

Although she experienced a few "bumps in the road," Beasley plans on returning to Guatemala for a month this summer to continue helping the citizens in Baja Verapaz. "The medical experience was one of, if not the best, experiences of my life thus far," she said.

Providing care for citizens of Guatemala was not the only experience participants engaged in. Many connections were formed during the trip that helped students immerse themselves in the culture.

For instance, there was one "break day" during the trip, when the students were invited to attend a Mayan gratitude ceremony, which was held at the top of a mountain. The group hiked up the mountain until they came to a small area where many precious items were laid on the ground; including resin from trees, chocolate, bread and corn. All of the items were then lit on fire and prayers (spoken in Mayan language) were said until the fire burned down.

The ceremony lasted about an hour and a half. Some of the students even dressed in Mayan clothing as a sign of respect.

Students were also encouraged to help the cooks, who were local women. Many of the students learned to make tortillas, although they weren't very round or even (which was a joke often made by the cooks).

In the Mayan culture, corn is king, which is why much of their diet consists of corn. Many meals incorporated corn, including tamales and corn tortillas made from scratch (which are thicker than those in the United States).

The goal of the Medical Practicum is to obtain a deep cultural experience, which is why the organizers chose to travel to Central America. For many students, this was their first time in another country. "Some of our students have never experienced being a minority before," Osborne said. "People stare at you for the first time, and if you haven't experienced that, it's like 'oh this is different.'" This new exposure is what helps students to become more empathetic toward others who may be seen as a minority, since they have been there themselves.

The group also learned about medicinal plants from one of the interpreters, Juve (they called her "Donya Juve"), who translated between Poqomchi' and Spanish. However, being an interpreter was not her only job, she also acted as a mid-wife to local women. "She gave us a presentation one evening," Osborne said. "She walked around the area for an hour and pulled all these plants, and told us about how she would use them if she didn't have medicine, since they usually don't have medicine."

There are many different natural medicines used in Guatemala. Like coffee grounds, they can be mixed with a little bit of water and put on a wound to stop bleeding. Potatoes can also be used to make a paste for burns and nopal cactus can be cooked and used to treat gastritis and heart burn.

Beasley also learned a lot from Juve. "One of our students on the trip had a problem with her feet she had a bunch of bug bites," Beasley said. "Donya Juve at night would massage her feet for her to help relieve some of the tension and some of the pressure that was building up, as well as soak her feet in different herbal remedies."

Along with the deep cultural experience, students worked alongside different medical providers, some of whom were Manchester University alumni or part of the Church of the Brethren.

Beasley worked with many "wonderful" physicians and healthcare providers. However, two medical professionals stuck out to her the most: Paul Fry-Miller (a retired physician assistant who worked at the Parkview clinic in North Manchester) and Dr. Eric Reichenbach (a board-certified family physician who also works at the Parkview Clinic in North Manchester).

Fry-Miller showed Beasley how to be invested in the patients. "He asks patients about their lives, where they work, what their family is like, how the problem is impacted their life," Beasley said. "He works with patients to find ways to heal them, or for them to manage their symptoms, through like stretching or exercising or nutrition rather than just medication."

As for Reichenbach, Beasley was able to form a bond with this health care provider, one where they could learn from each other as they talked about nature, birds, and even family. Reichenbach was also one to not only answer questions from the students but to ask them questions as well.

At the end of each night, students and health care providers would come together to debrief the day: discussing how many patients they saw, what they learned, and what they could improve on. This was Osborne's favorite part of the trip; he enjoyed hearing that the students strive to change about their future now that they have gone through this experience, because it has impacted them so significantly.

The students' take on social media and cellphone usage also shocked Osborne. "Many of them had not been without cellphones and social media ever," he said, "and yet they talked about how they didn't want to go back (to their phones)."

In years past, the Medical Practicum has journeyed to other parts of Central America, including Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, as well as the Dominican Republic.

However, in more recent years they have been returning to Guatemala thanks to the connections with FUNDENOR AQ'AB'AL, an organization that strives to strengthen their community. Manchester will be returning to Guatemala next January to help more individuals receive health care.