

Manchester University Students Make a Difference in Guatemala

By: William Carroll, Wabash Plain Dealer Editor

Carroll, William. "Manchester University Students Make a Difference in Guatemala." *Wabash Plain Dealer* [Wabash, IN], 25 February 2023, p. A1-A12

Manchester University medical practicum students recently returned from a trip to provide necessary medical assistance and supplies to Guatemala, making them the most recent group in a tradition at the university which dates back to 1981.

Manchester University Professor Dr. Jeffrey Osborne, who heads up the program said that this year the program consisted of 12 students, nine U.S. based providers, including three physicians, two physician assistants, one nurse practitioner/midwife, two pharmacists and one dentist and three medical providers from Guatemala.

Participants trekked to an area in the central highlands of Guatemala populated primarily by Mayan natives, which is recognized as one of the poorest areas in the country. The region is known as Ribaco, Baja Verapaz in Guatemala.

Osborne said that Guatemala is populated by 22 different Mayan groups who speak a variety of Mayan languages, which makes translation a bit of a challenge. Osborne explained that the group needed interpreters both for Spanish and for several of the Mayan dialects spoken in the region. Often, translations would be required to be made from English to Spanish and then from Spanish to one of the Mayan dialects and then back up the chain to English in order to provide the best possible care for those Guatemalans who availed themselves of the program.

Local participants in the program lived where they worked, which compared to amenities in the U.S. was quite primitive. Students slept in sleeping bags on the floor in a communal area of one of the buildings and not only worked with the local populace but shared meals and community activities as well.

"It is hard work, but it is meaningful and fulfilling as well," Osborne said.

During the trip, Osborne said the group performed 1,452 medical consultations and 199 dental consultations. Over \$20,000 in medicines were purchased for the trip using money donated by a variety of donors. Osborne explained that medicine was purchased at reduced cost from a provider who obtains medicines from pharmaceutical companies, meaning that the actual value of the medicines provided as part of the program is significantly higher. In addition to a clinic used for medical and dental consultations, students also had the opportunity to work in an onsite lab. In general students shadowed licensed medical providers as those providers worked with Guatemalan citizens for a variety of needs.

One of those students, senior Kaitlin Graber said it was her first time participating in the program and she described the experience as "amazing."

"I had the best time of my life," Graber said during an interview Thursday morning.

She said she had not only had the opportunity to shadow medical professionals, but also participated in the student run lab where blood and urine tests were performed. She said one of her duties was providing intake services including such activities as taking blood pressure readings and temperatures.

“It was refreshing,” Graber said of her experience in Guatemala. “The conditions were more comfortable than I thought. It was a wonderful community environment.”

Graber said one of her worries she had before going on the trip was having to take showers using cold water from a bucket, but after working hard during a hot day she found them quite refreshing.

Graber who is a biology/chemistry major, who also is minoring in music due to her love of violin, said the trip really solidified for her what career path she is most interested in. She said before the trip she thought she might like to be a physician or physician’s assistant, but after making the trip she was certain that medical school is in her future and that she wants to be a primary care provider. She said one of the reasons for her decision is seeing how the doctors interacted with their patients and how they spoke with them and worked with them to get the best possible outcome. She thought it was impressive which made her want to perform that function as well.

She said her biggest takeaway from the trip was realizing how intricate everyone’s life is around the world and how everyone on the planet is really interconnected.

Osborne said one of his goals in running the program and in his normal activities at the university in the biology/chemistry department is in helping students to become primary care providers, especially in much needed rural areas. According to the figures provided by Osborne, over the period of time the program has been in existence, 441 students have participated in the program as well as 140 different U.S. healthcare providers. Of those students who have participated in the program, 33 have returned to the program as providers themselves. Osborne said 69 other staff members of Manchester University have also participated in the program.

Of the students who have participated in the program over the years, 58 percent have entered the healthcare field, with 102 being physicians, 27 dentists, 31 pharmacists, 16 physician’s assistants, 22 nurses, seven medical technologists and seven being masters of public health.

Osborne said one of the questions he gets about the program is why the program focuses on Central America and other developing nations (the program has gone to Panama, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic). Osborne explained that while there are very rural areas in the U.S. with need, students can’t get the same intensity of need as they can experience in developing nations. He said it is that intensity which really brings the lesson home for students about the importance of the trip.

Osborne said providers get significant benefits as well, being able to practice their trade in an extremely needed area.

Osborne said the program began with chemistry professor Ed Miller in 1981 and has continued each year, with the exception of a couple of years due to COVID-19. The university is already preparing for next year’s trip in January 2024 and as always is looking for students and U.S. providers to help participate in the program.