Bridging Health Gaps in Central America: Students Empowering and Educating Patients in Rural Panama

George Asrian[1,2], Kareena Shankta[2]
[1] Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, [2] University of Pennsylvania

Introduction

- In May 2024, a group of 20+ students traveled to Panama to provide healthcare services and medical education to underserved communities
- The mission trip was organized through Global Brigades, an international non-profit
- Students were from:
  - University of Pennsylvania
  - Emory University
  - University of Richmond

Objectives

- Facilitate two mobile health clinics
- Provide health education in the remote communities of El Higo and Cabuya
- Collect patient data in a new EMR system and suggest improvements
- Learn and practice medical Spanish
- Learn about the local culture and gain an understanding of local health economics and access issues

Methods/Approach

- Over 5 days we facilitated:
  - 288 medical consultations
  - 146 nutrition consultations
  - 33 health education workshops in Spanish
- We shadowed and assisted an American dentist during patient examinations and extractions
- We engaged in candid discussions with patients about the Panamanian healthcare system

Key Experiences

- We learned the Panamanian healthcare system is operated by two government agencies:
  - *Social Security Fund (CSS)*: manages public hospitals which provide care to those paying into Social Security Fund through payroll
  - *Ministry of Health (MINSA)*: operates public clinics and regional hospitals offering low-cost services
    - We discovered these facilities are often unavailable in remote areas like the two communities where our mobile clinics were operating
- We observed parents bringing their children to see medical professionals for the first time all year and getting medications that they could not access or pay for elsewhere
- Many students learned to take blood pressure readings and other vital signs from patients for the first time on this trip
  - Local nurses and physicians taught these skills to our group in Spanish and demonstrated how to use the equipment



Impact on Personal Growth

- This experience has inspired me to devote my time to providing free services and education to patients in resource-deprived communities abroad when I am a physician
- I was moved to see Panamanian citizens living happy, fulfilling lives and enjoying community, tradition, and music together despite infrastructure challenges
- I am grateful to the residents and our hosts for generously sharing their culture, food, and personal stories
- The trip enriched us all as we learned about gratitude and humility

Future Directions

- We will conduct more medical brigades with these communities and build upon our relationships with local nurses, physicians, and patients
- We intend to produce a health infrastructure and access report during future mission trips describing health access and education challenges and potential solutions
  - We intend to speak with local patients, officials, doctors, economists, and global health experts

Conclusions

- The experience highlighted global healthcare challenges, encouraged cross-cultural learning, and inspired future initiatives