

Pushing Past Barriers: A Glimpse of Uganda Through a Medical Student's Eyes

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During the summer of 2009 I travelled to Arua, Uganda and volunteered for an NGO named Rural Initiative for Community Empowerment (RICE). During my initial meeting with the director, a charismatic and welcoming Ugandan, he suggested I use the knowledge I had gained in first year medical school to educate Rural Communities by way of health presentations. With this in mind by day two of my visit I set about designing a program that would touch on various health issues that could help educate communities and schools on topics such as HIV/AIDS, Malaria prevention, Sexual Reproductive Health, Nutrition and sanitation.

Locally referred to as “Mundu”, a local slang for white person, I set out into villages scattered throughout the North Western corner of Uganda. Many of the people I talked with were welcoming and eager to learn more about how they could make small changes in their daily lives in order to improve their health.

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However, on more than one occasion as I arrived on site I had to negotiate with the local witch doctor. On one particular occasion after some heated discussion between the witch doctor and my translator, the witch doctor reluctantly lifted his wooden cane and let us enter. I hoped that somehow I could convey to the witch doctor that I was not trying to impose anything on their village, but instead help to educate for the benefit of his villager's health. As I presented under the mango tree, the witch doctor grimaced when I looked his way. Half way through the presentation he started yelling at me and my translator told me with a smile the witch doctor was casting a “spell” on me for crossing into his territory.

Despite the “spell”, I left the village that day with an added appreciation of cross cultural differences and the future challenges biological medicine faces in order to mainstream itself into many remote areas of the world.

For more information on RICE and if interested in volunteering please visit: www.riceuganda.org

Lessons from the Travelling Patient

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I remember how nervous I felt upon our arrival. The motion sickness from the helicopter ride quickly subsided as the overwhelming crowd of local villagers greeted us. In the midst of all the excitement, a mother carrying an infant infected with Yaws (a rare disfiguring infection of the bone and cartilage) caught the corner of my eye. They, as well as others, were expecting us and I was eager to help. A part of me hoped that we, as a medical team, could live up to their expectations.

Last summer, I travelled with The Summer Medical Institute Northwest Medical Missions Team to provide healthcare to the isolated villages in Papua, Indonesia. These villages are located up in the mountains and are only accessible via small airplanes and helicopters. There is no electricity, no running water and many still hunt with bows and arrows. The atmosphere truly felt like a picture taken out of the pages from National Geographic. Needless to say, they had very little access to healthcare.

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With our limited medical supplies, we treated a variety of patients in our clinic: cleaning and dressing wounds, providing B12/analgesic injections, treating common and complex tropical infectious diseases. Sadly, there were patients with illnesses we could not treat. However, the most memorable patient was a man who I appropriately named the “travelling patient”. After hearing our helicopter fly over his village, he trekked barefoot for 3 days just to see us. As he arrived exhausted with his feet blistered and damaged, I wondered what motivated him to endure such a grueling journey. When asked if it was worth it, he responded with simple yes, and expressed his sincere gratitude for having someone finally care for him.

This experience serves as a reminder of how honored we are to be in a profession where patients actively seek our care and help. It serves as one of my driving forces to become a better physician for my future patients. It is a humbling responsibility; one I do not intend to take lightly, and the story of the travelling patient will help me to never forget this privilege.