VIEWPOINTS

Personal and Professional Growth Through an International Sabbatical Experience

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I would like to encourage faculty members to apply for sabbaticals and consider pursuing international experiences. From January through June of 2012, I completed a sabbatical at Hillside Health Care International in Belize. While there were many objectives listed on my application, one important goal was to give back to an organization that had educated our pharmacy students over the previous 4 years. In April 2008, a delegation from Drake University and University of Wisconsin had visited Belize to explore the potential of establishing advanced pharmacy practice experiences (APPEs) there. From that first visit, I planned to return and spend an extended period of time providing care to the people in the Toledo District of Belize. At Drake University “preparing students for responsible global citizenship” is part of our mission, and therefore, it was not difficult to show how my sabbatical proposal reflected this mission.

As I look back, I reflect not on the impact I had on the people but on the impact they had on me. Hillside provides free health care in a permanent clinic in Eldridgeville and mobile clinics to remote villages. Belizean staff members interpret Quetchi and Mopan Mayan dialects for patients who do not speak English. Villagers are very patient with the students providing the care and the physicians re-checking the students’ work, and are grateful for the access to care.

In the villages, life is simple, with many of the modern conveniences missing, and manual labor is a way of life. Men walk to fields they have carved out of the jungle hills using machetes and fire. Crops are sold at market while they eat rice and tortillas to save money. Typically only women and children are seen in the mobile visits because the men are working. Women seek birth control many times without the permission of their husbands.

While collaborating with Hillside staff members to develop goals, I realized their concerns are many of the

things taken for granted here: fixing their houses to stay dry during the torrential rains and making enough money to send their kids to grade school and hopefully high school. College is just a dream. Hillside staff members are among the most amazing people I have met. Each month they welcome a new group of 11-13 healthcare students for an educational rotation in medicine, pharmacy, physical therapy, and nursing. Every 2 or 3 years they welcome a new medical director. They gladly accept various short-term volunteers who stay anywhere from 1 week to 1 year. The staff members are among the most flexible people I have ever encountered. They have been trained to provide care and skills way beyond their years of formal education.

There were patients who had a huge impact on me. First, there was an elderly man we often stopped by to see, bring food, give medicine to, and bathe. He was a man who seemed forgotten by family and neighbors, living in conditions that most could not imagine. During our visits, he routinely made us laugh, even in the midst of what some would consider a desperate situation, he seemed to have found peace. I also remember a 4 year-old girl who had part of her foot cut off in a machete accident, but during her stay on an amputee ward in the hospital remarked to her mother, “At least I have my leg.”

Even through their struggles to make enough money to feed and clothe their families, educate their children, and provide adequate housing, the people are fairly happy. Who are we to decide what they need? I saw mission group after mission group come to provide what they deemed Belize needs, many times forgetting to ask the community or neglecting to understand the impact of their project. As one traveler and author wrote, “One outcome of traveling should be to develop an uneasy conscience and a critical self-consciousness about our practices when we go abroad.”¹

I learned to be patient and to listen to the needs of others first and foremost. In the United States, our way is just that. . .our way. After treating patients in Africa, a young doctor commented, “We could get so much done with so little over there it’s like we’re not doing

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something right over here.”² There are other ways of life that can provide more joy and peace than our hectic consumer-driven world. Should we return to a more simple approach?

So look into a sabbatical, consider international experiences, write a plan, and have an adventure that will bring personal growth and renewal. The more we learn about others the more we learn about ourselves. To teach empathy, cultural competence, and global citizenship,

pharmacy faculty members must develop those areas in themselves.

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