

Amber Priester
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Medical Volunteering in Cusco, Peru

Through the Brody Scholars Summer Enrichment Program, I had the opportunity to spend one week volunteering in a small clinic on the outskirts of town in Cusco, Peru. As someone who is committed to practicing medicine in North Carolina and who has lived in Eastern NC my entire life, I realized that my inexperience with medicine outside of the Carolinas may be a hindrance in my growth as a future physician. This trip represented my first opportunity to immerse myself in healthcare outside of both my home state and my country, which allowed me to learn about the Peruvian health system in a meaningful, hands-on way.

During my volunteer orientation, one of the first things we learned is that healthcare is only 3% of the GDP of Peru. For comparison, in the United States, healthcare is approximately 18% of our GDP. In Peru, this translates to low funding for modern medical equipment or even basic necessities like gloves and hand sanitizer. Peru faces a severe shortage of physicians – over 16,000, in fact. Areas outside of Lima, the capital, are hit the hardest by this physician shortage. Because of the low funding for healthcare and the lack of trained professionals, the Peruvian people frequently protest or go on strike, affecting the clinic hours and people's access to healthcare. Doctors and nurses are often overburdened with mundane but critical tasks, such as cutting and folding gauze pads or using a pen and ruler to make patient record tables.

Things are not all doom and gloom in Peru. Seguro Integral de Salud, or SIS, is a program in Peru that provides free and low-cost medical care to impoverished individuals who qualify. SIS covers 100% of clinic services and 70% of hospital services. The clinic I was in, Centro de Salud Dignidad, had a patient population that was majority SIS. I saw several instances where

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patients said they came in for regular check-ups because it was free for them, which is wonderful from a primary care standpoint. Despite these important social welfare programs in place, I saw how difficult it was for many patients to access care. The clinic was up on a mountain, and most of the patients relied on public transportation that dropped off down the street from the clinic. Since it was winter in Peru and the city of Cusco has no indoor heating, the patients had to bundle up, making it difficult to bring small children.

In addition to learning about the bureaucratic healthcare system in Peru, I had the chance to assist and learn from the doctors and nurses. I spent one day in obstetrics, where I took patients' vitals and learned critical parts of the physical examination from my preceptor. I learned how to use doppler to find fetal heart tones, I had the chance to measure fundal height, and I learned how to feel for the fetal head in late gestation. Despite the lack of 4D ultrasound machines and other fancy equipment, I helped provide valuable medical care to pregnant women in Peru. We identified multiple women with preeclampsia, and we saw one woman who was having a lupus flare-up. I was able to picture and help treat some of the disorders that I learned about during my M1 year, which was immensely valuable.

Another area that I rotated through was triage. It was there that I saw firsthand what medical supply shortages can do to patient care. My preceptor in triage often had to reuse gloves, skip hand sanitizer in between patients, and forgo face masks due to supply shortages. It was even difficult for me to follow glove-changing and hand-sanitizing techniques that we practice here in the United States due to the rapid turnover of patients.

In addition to learning about the Peruvian health system and strengthening my physical exam skills, I had the opportunity to practice and strengthen my Spanish-speaking skills. While I

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still have a long way to go to be fluent in Spanish, I learned a lot while I was there, and I also got comfortable with navigating language barriers. These skills will help me with the large Spanish-speaking population in the Carolinas, and my experience in Peru has furthered my desire to continue studying Spanish so that I can better serve all of my patients.

My time in Cusco, Peru was nothing short of amazing. In addition to the practical skills I learned in the clinic, I was able to take trips to see Machu Picchu and Rainbow Mountain. I loved afternoons spent wandering the various churches in Cusco, or the evenings spent talking with my host family over hot cups of tea, huddled under warm alpaca blankets. I learned so many lessons about healthcare and cultural humility that I will take with me through life and into practice in North Carolina. I am so grateful to the Brody family for their support of my endeavor!