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A Mission of Hope in Ecuador

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For many college students, spring break means hanging out on the beach and partying with their friends. For nine senior Clemson nursing students, the spring break of 2008 will be remembered as one with lots of hard work, long hours of travel and service to others. The nursing students took part in a medical mission in several rural villages near Macas, Ecuador, through a partnership with Volunteers in Medical Missions. The students received academic credit for the clinical component of community health nursing. Community health nursing utilizes service-learning as a pedagogy for teaching community care, social justice and cultural competence. While all students enrolled in community health nursing participate in service-learning projects, these are usually at the local level. This student group was unique because they implemented their service-learning at the international level.

I led this industrious nursing group in its project. In previous years, I have also directed students who traveled to Guatemala. Dr. Stephanie Davis of the School of Nursing also accompanied us in hopes of exploring ideas for future implementation with nurse practitioner students.

The mission team consisted of several physicians, a family nurse practitioner, a certified nurse midwife, two registered nurses, nine student nurses and several lay people. The team arrived in Quito, Ecuador, late in the evening on Saturday and traveled to Ambato by bus. Sunday morning began with breakfast and attending a local worship service. Members of the church gave the team an official welcome and prayed for their safe travel. The remainder of the day was spent traveling to Macas in southern Ecuador.

The following days began each morning at 6:00 a.m. with breakfast by 7:30 a.m. The team traveled to remote villages by bus each morning and set up make-shift clinics in a variety of settings. The in-country host had made arrangements and prepared the villagers the American doctors and nurses came to assist. Within a few minutes of the team’s arrival, hundreds of people would congregate to be seen for their health care needs. Because of the unsanitary conditions and poor water quality, all patients were given vitamins and parasitic medications.

People with specific health problems were seen by physicians or nurse practitioners. Student nurses worked with physicians and nurse practitioners to provide treatment and to assist with minor surgeries. The student nurses also worked in the pharmacy dispensing medications. As part of the service-learning objectives, the students educated adults and children on basic hygiene and oral care. Eyeglasses and toothbrushes, which had been donated by various organizations such as the CU-Student Nurses’ Association, were provided to patients. Approximately 800 people were provided with health care during the four days of clinics. Each day, the team worked until they had attended to everyone who had come to the clinic. Several home visits were made to patients who could not travel to the clinic site.

The student nurses learned many valuable lessons. They conducted cultural assessments with native Ecuadorians to learn cultural practices that have relevance for the provision of health care. They interviewed key informants to learn the unique problems that exist in the local communities. They made visits to homes where people lived in extreme poverty. During one of the home visits, the students met a mother and grandmother who were trying to care for two sons with cerebral palsy. The family had no food in the home, and the water had recently been turned off because the mother was unable to pay the bill. Everyone on the team gathered their snacks and water to leave with the family. The team donated the money to have the water turned back on and paid for a year in advance.

Most American college students do not truly comprehend what real poverty is. These nursing students now understand and have seen the firsthand effects. These images will have a lasting impact on their lives and nursing practice. Many of the students are already planning future trips after graduation in May.

Singer and songwriter John Mayer talks of “waiting on the world to change.” In the CU School of Nursing, students are not waiting. They are making a difference in people’s lives now.

www.hehd.clemson.edu/Pages/News_Events/onlinenewsarchive/2008/feb08/smallnumbers.php

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