

Parag Bakshi Fellowship International Medical Experience
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Thanks to the American College of Physicians and the *Parag Bakshi Fellowship Fund*, this fall I had an amazing and unique medical and cultural experience. I traveled to Central America and worked at a clinic in a very poor, underserved area of Southern Belize. I was hoping to learn about tropical medicine, see interesting and rare diseases, and improve my physical diagnosis skills; what I experience was so much more.

Upon my arrival to the country, I was immediately struck by not only the beauty of the lush green landscape and clear blue waters, but also by the beauty of the people. They were clothed in bright colors and their faces were illuminated with warm smiles. They greeted us with fervent welcomes and displayed true happiness, despite their daily hardships.

The Hillside International Health Center, which sits off of a dirt road several miles from Punta Gorda, the capital of the most rural, poverty-stricken district in Belize, became my home for the next month. Though small, the clinic was surprisingly well equipped, carrying most of the medications we use here in the United States. It is run efficiently by a staff of two US physicians (a pediatrician and an internist), several administrators, nurses, and a translator. Although the social situations and state of diseases were often complex, the busy flow of patients was managed easily without the hassle of insurance cards, phone calls, pre-authorizations or billing, which medical offices in the States are so often consumed.

Hillside, which was founded in 2000, is funded by the Belizean Ministry of Health, a private foundation, and generous donations from other sources. The patients don't pay anything for any of the care or medicines they receive. The physicians and a few of the nurses are affiliated with and compensated by the US Catholic Ministries. At any one time there are three to six medical students, PA students and medical residents from all over the US and England working and learning at the clinic. While there, they live on the campus of the clinic and are truly able to immerse themselves in the culture and lives of the people that they treat. For the most part the patients seek care for routine complaints: colds, diarrheal illness, rashes, back pain, headaches, and minor trauma; though we also treated many diabetics, hypertensives and other chronic medical conditions at each clinic session (4 weekly), we would see up to 35 patients, mostly from Punta Gorda and nearby villages. The clinic runs a shuttle to/from town and the clinic daily, so that those without transportation can reach medical assistance. Hillside owns the only EKG machine in the southern part of the country, and we were able to get basic blood work and x-rays through the nearby hospital. The closest sub-specialists are a six-hour car drive away, so we relied heavily on our physical exam skills, consulting with one another and researching our questions on books and on the internet.

The highlight of my experience was the mobile clinic. It was during these times we really got to experience and learn about the lifestyles and customs of the Garifuna, Creole, and Mayan people who live in Belize. Twice a week we would pack up a 4-wheel drive vehicle with supplies and medicine and travel, sometimes for hours, on dirt roads to remote villages. Once there, we would see up to 80 patients. Each village had a monthly assigned visit date, thus our arrival was anticipated. As we drove into each village, barefoot children would wave from doorways and mothers would gather their families and set out for the health post where they would patiently wait in the hot sun to be seen.

We would take turns making house calls to the villagers that were too sick or elderly to come to the health post. On occasion, we had the honor of being asked to share a homemade meal after clinic hours. It was always humbling to see inside the lives of our patients. Their dwellings, which housed as many as fifteen people, were made from wood, with thatched roofs, dirt floors, hammocks for sleeping, a cooking fire and a latrine out back. Ironically, they had so little but were healthier than many of the patients we see in Delaware.

The staff at Hillside and the people of Belize treated us better than I could have ever imagined. Neighbors cooked us traditional dishes and brought us treats. The staff entertained us in their homes, helped us with travel plans, led us on hikes, gave us rides to market and even took us out on the town. Patients showed appreciation in the form of heartfelt thanks, smiles and sometimes even a hug.

We had weekends off and were able to travel throughout the beautiful country, often receiving discounts on travel and lodging just by mentioning we worked at Hillside. As if the cultural diversity and medical experience weren't enough, spending time on the beautiful, desolate, white sand beaches, snorkeling and diving on the coral reefs, hiking and seeing endangered wildlife in the rainforest, boating through the mangroves and wandering through cozy little villages reinforced to us how lucky we were for the opportunity which Hillside provided.

I can honestly say, I feel honored having had the opportunity to volunteer for such a worthy institution. My experience renewed in me the true spirit of medicine and helped me remember the greater good that can be accomplished by a small number of caring individuals. I now appreciate the myriad of challenges faced in a nation much less fortunate than ours.

This trip helped me to understand that whether I'm in a third world country, or in a clinic back home, each person has their own set of values and cultural beliefs that we need to consider. I have gained respect for treating patients without the luxury of expensive tests, and have learned to use my training, combined with my instincts, to help others in need.

I thank Hillside Health Center and its magnificent staff for the learning opportunity they provided to me. I thank the people of Belize for showing me beauty in simplicity and resilience in the face of struggle. And I thank the ACP and the family of Parag Bakshi for enabling me to take this personal, spiritual and medical journey. I hope that other residents and physicians can pursue similar venues and by doing so enrich the lives of those in developing nations around the world who need their help. Hopefully, they will also find that their lives and practices will be renewed by reaching out to others.