

## Young Adult Medical Mission Experiences: Lindsey Krening, Belize | 2011

The summer of 2011, I spent two weeks in San Ignacio, Belize on a medical mission trip through International Service Learning. ISL is an organization that offers experiential public health programs in the Caribbean, Central and South America, Mexico, and Africa. The benefits of the program are two-fold: students gain practical field medical skills and engage in rewarding mission work while the underprivileged receive much needed health care. I found the entire experience to be extremely enriching, as I was able to see immediately the positive effects of our work as well as gain valuable hands-on medical experience.

Each day, we would travel to nearby impoverished villages and set up clinics to provide treatment to local inhabitants with chronic ailments. The residents of these villages were predominantly citizens of nearby countries such as Guatemala or El Salvador, who had sought new residency in Belize. Often, however, their alien status inhibited them from going to doctors to receive proper medical care. As a result, many were living with untreated diabetes, asthma, HIV, and other illnesses. Our first day in each village, we would travel from house to house, asking whether anyone living there was in need of medical assistance. If so, we would take a brief medical history and write them a ticket for a time slot at the clinic. The following two days we would return to the same village, set up our clinic in a local school, church, or community center, and see individually the patients we had given tickets to, as well as other community members who were willing to wait for an opening to be treated.

As students, our job was to get a complete medical history of each patient, take his or her vitals, and then present the case to the doctor. He was a Belizean physician who volunteered his days off work to help in the clinic, while continuing to work nights in the ER. His commitment to serving the underserved was truly inspiring. After the physician had written a prescription, we would fill it at our makeshift pharmacy and give the patient instructions for its use. The entire process was done in Spanish, yet despite the language barrier, it was not difficult to understand the gratitude these patients felt for the service rendered to them.



The most heart wrenching situations were when we were unequipped to provide treatment for a particular, serious ailment. Having to send the patient away empty-handed was a truly painful experience. One lady brought her severely mentally and physically handicapped child to the clinic, who had sores from being confined to bed and numerous other health problems. Additionally, the family was running low on food to feed her, since she was confined to a liquid diet. Our clinic did not have the supplies to provide medical treatment to her, and we were forced to turn the mother and child away. Later in the week, however, we received a donation of PediaSure, and we were able to make a house-visit and provide the young girl with more food. The mother's repeated cries of thankfulness brought me to tears.

At the end of our time in each village, we would lead a teeth-brushing session at a local school, teaching the children how to properly brush their teeth, as dental hygiene is not a high priority in Central American countries such as Belize. These sessions always put a big smile on my face, as the kids were so receptive to us.

In addition to my time at the clinics, I also was fortunate enough to spend one day shift and one night shift in the local San Ignacio Emergency Room, shadowing and assisting the ER doctor on call. I was responsible for taking the vitals and assessing the medical history of every patient before the doctor saw them. When the ER was slow, I was able to practice starting IVs, measuring blood sugar levels, and suturing. I even got to assist in the

delivery of a baby! The experience I gained from this was invaluable and lent me so much insight into the economics and politics of health care in an underprivileged country.

I feel so fortunate to have had the experience to gain such valuable hands-on medical experience, especially since one day I hope to be a doctor myself. I also feel so privileged to have been a part of, if only for a brief time, such a rich culture with so much to offer those who take the time to get to appreciate it. I think often about the people I met and worked with in Belize, who are so much less privileged than I am, but yet live with such a sense of community and compassion. They should serve as an example for us all.

I am extremely grateful for all the support and money given to me by my Wellshire family, and I held you all near to my heart throughout my trip. Your continued support in all my endeavors means so much to me.