

Nagendran
Alan Lowinger

As part of the Student Scholars Program, I was given an unbelievable opportunity to gain clinical experience in an international setting. Having been involved with the international health community at RWJMS throughout medical school, I was thrilled to spend many months abroad in India, treating patients in various settings through links with charity hospitals.

I spent my clinical time in Rishikesh, a small city about six hours north of Delhi. At the base of the Himalayas, and not far from the glacial source of the Ganges, the river water there is crystal clear. Since Rishikesh is a holy city, alcohol, meat and eggs are not available- though various peddlers sell rudraksh, crystals, books, amulets and even small plastic jugs- for pilgrims to take home some *ganga jal* – holy Ganges water.

I worked with two ashrams, mainly as a primary-care provider at their charity hospitals. My days started very early, generally with sunrise. After an early-morning yoga class, I would make my way to clinic- where large crowds of patients- beggars, wandering monks, trinket sellers- would await health care.

The spectrum of disease that I saw on a daily basis was unbelievable, and in many cases, heartbreaking. There were active TB cases in my office almost daily. Cases of dermatitis and active neuritis secondary to B-vitamin deficiency were common. For children, vision problems due to lack of access to milk and *ghee* (clarified butter) were also seen- in this case, it wasn't a problem with their access to vitamin A, but rather to the fat that would allow them to absorb it.

With such an experience, I was able to become adept not only at gaining clinical knowledge in medicine, but also at learning how to interpret labs and radiology, and how to treat a wide variety of pathology. There was a pharmacy on staff that provided medications for free.

Additionally, I was able, through the ophthalmology department, to work with ophthalmologists, who provided free cataract surgeries several times per week.

Through the Nagendran Fund, I was able to realistically spend part of my Student Scholar year in India. The education I received exceeded all expectations. In addition to being able to afford to volunteer for months on end, I was also able to afford the Hindi lessons that allowed me to communicate with my patients. My education extended to Indian traditional medicine, and to philosophy. I was also able to travel to other cities, such as Gangotri and Chandigarh, to participate in local health screenings.

As a medical student, I was able to participate in a once-in-a-lifetime experience abroad. My time in India has cemented my commitment to providing care in international settings and to underserved populations. I would love to volunteer abroad again as soon as is realistically possible.