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UMDNJ - Nagendran Fellow
International Elective Summary
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While negotiating a sharp left over a dirt road in a blazing Pakistani desert, a fellow volunteer broke as we saw someone in our path. We slowly approached a gaunt boy sitting up with his legs extended in front of him; one hand on the ground for support and one cupped towards us. Looking at his feet inverted fully to 90 degrees, toes pointing directly at each other, it was obvious his ankles, and probably legs too, were fractured. "Stop!" I yelled, but the driver, who was a local, sped up, explaining, "These boys are kidnapped and beaten by armed men waiting behind that dune. If anyone stops to help they'll be robbed, and there are no police here." I was silent from horror, and deep thought...

This is just one experience from a volunteer trip to Pakistan, which I've made annually since 2001. Each experience reconfirmed my desire to serve as a physician, from the first when I fundraised for and managed a girls' orphanage, to the free clinic for impoverished women and children we started, to the recent rotation I did at that clinic and others. It's always a myriad of emotions, from the excitement of traveling, to frustration at the bureaucracy impairing change, to dismay at the level of poverty, to inspiration. Inspiration from working with great physicians who sacrifice for these patients, and even more from seeing people with nothing in hand not only survive but be content, maintaining their dignity.

The international elective which I submitted for the Nagendran fellowship occurred halfway through my third year. I had already completed my internal medicine and family medicine rotations (both of which proved invaluable) and traveled to Islamabad for one month to work in a few different healthcare settings. I spent 1 week on the inpatient wards of Shifaa International Hospital, a new and technologically advanced facility which caters to those who can afford such care, 1 week in the hospital's 73-bed Filahi ward which is free inpatient care to the destitute, and 2 weeks in the outpatient women and children clinic I set up 3 years earlier. All three experiences were very different, and gave me the opportunity to see all the sides of health care delivery in a third world country.

Besides the different spectrum of illnesses, the most drastic change was to see how people cope with an almost complete lack of resources. Sure, the wealthy there have access to practically the same medications, tests, and care as people in the West do, but that is not a true reflection on how the majority of that country, and the world, live. The week in the Filahi ward really touched me, because it was all set up by the philanthropy of so many people. And it bridged the gap between the indigent population with curable diseases, and the cures that are out there. A bridge that we, myself included, take for granted in this country, but one that is not readily available elsewhere, and can make all the difference.

But the two weeks in the outpatient clinic was the culmination of all my efforts and my trip. I set up the clinic years earlier, where my role was fundraising and administrative, because it was before I had any medical knowledge. But to return to the same site to work now on the other side of patient care, to give the vaccinations and offer the primary care with my own hands that I had only talked about to donors before, was

truly amazing. I felt so blessed to be able to be there, and so happy that my medicine rotations more than prepared me to really roll up my sleeves and make a difference for the patients from that village.

..."Stop!" This time the driver listened, and I asked to return to a soldier we passed. We paid him to leave his post and drove him to the boy. He walked up and questioned the boy aggressively, pointing his rifle in every direction. While yelling at the child that he was being detained for blocking military traffic, he took him into the car. We drove the kind actor back to his post and took the boy another hour to the hospital we volunteered at, and eventually to his family. We didn't catch the bad guys, but making a difference is more than that. It's about having the heart to want to do something for people first. Then one must gain the confidence and leadership skills to take action, and finally the knowledge on the best ways to assist and the skills to execute them. I cannot describe how excited I was to spend a month in Pakistan again, having run the full gambit of growing as a leader through the years with my projects there. It was such a blessing to be able to go, and inspired me even further to continue my efforts for the underserved.

If you would like any more information on my organization, it's available at www.shacklenet.com

Photos

The Clinic before renovations were done



A family in the town's center



The clinic currently at it's main entrances



The injured boy from the above story

