

My experience in Ecuador was wonderful. Aside from tourist attractions such as standing on both sides of the equator, the Otavalo market place, horseback riding, and hiking in the Amazon, I got to improve my Spanish through lessons and living with local families. Additionally, I participated in Health Brigades in which we went to different communities and ran free clinics for the indigenous population.

We went to one of the most poor areas of Quito to the marketplace to work a health clinic. We did histories in Spanish and gave physical exams to over a hundred children and their parents who live and work in the marketplace. As this was our first Health Brigade, it was frustrating at points because as first years we do not really know very much medicine and we did not have enough medication to help everyone. These people have such little access to healthcare that some had coughs and pain in their lungs for a year and we were the first opportunity for them to get medical attention. It was absolutely incredible how much different their lives are from ours. We brought little gifts (pencils and stickers) for the children and they were so happy to just get a pencil. The first girl I saw gave me a huge hug because I gave her 2 pencils and a little sharpener. Despite the fact that at times I felt a little helpless, the children and their parents were so appreciative that we were there at all trying our best to help them.

We went to a local hospital and clinic and saw how they practice indigenous medicine. In the same facility, people can choose to go to a western medicine doctor or a local indigenous curer. We spoke to a midwife and fregador (something like a physical therapist), who sometimes uses guinea pigs to diagnose her patients, as well as a shamman who can use all sorts of natural products to treat his patients. What I found most interesting about the visit was that more local people visit the western doctors and more foreigners go to see the practitioners of indigenous medicine.

We also visited a very rural clinic in the mountains. The only doctors they had working there were a pediatrician, a dentist, and an internist and each only worked for four hours a day, 1 day a week because the clinic could not afford to pay them for more hours. The insurance system was also something noteworthy. Each family would pay the clinic \$2 per month with a \$0.50 co-pay per visit. But if they did not pay the insurance each visit cost \$2. If they did not have the money, a social worker determined if they were unable to pay even with a payment plan and they were treated anyway and the costs absorbed by the clinic. A totally different world than in the US.

My second Health Brigade experience was much better than the last. I felt like we were more helpful as we actually had medications to help and more healthcare workers to consult with. There were still numerous children who had not seen a healthcare worker in years. I even had a case of a 13 year old with scabies. He had it for 3 years and amazingly, no one else in his family had gotten it. Each Health Brigade makes me more and more aware of the marked difference between what we have and what others have.

We spent two days going field to field doing a survey for the Centro de Salud de Peguche (Center of Health). We asked families how many people lived in 1 house (5-10), where they went when they were sick (home remedies, private doctors, local hospital), if they had any kind of insurance (very few, not surprising), and any health problems they had in the last year. I was actually really surprised at how few responses we had to the last question. Out of 6 people who were currently living in the house (not counting the 3 or 4 children who no longer lived with them) maybe 2 had a health issue worth tell us about. I was surprised that people who even had the flu as they spoke to us did not count that as noteworthy but as someone said, it is so common that it does not.

Our last Health Brigade in Otavalo was the most difficult because it was mostly elderly with lots of health problems and we were not prepared for much beyond the types of common child issues we had dealt with thus far. We also did a Health Brigade in the Amazon, where we took a canoe and then hiked for 2 hours to get to the village. This was a very rewarding experience because in the short time that we were there, we saw every person in the village that wanted to be seen. We were also able to interact with the community more so than in any other setting.

Overall, I feel like my month in Ecuador gave me enough exposure to know that international medicine is something I would like to do, at least for part of my career. I think my Spanish was greatly improved and even my understanding of other cultures and compassion for the underserved were heightened. I will definitely be coming back to South America when I know more medicine.

