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Medical Spanish Immersion, Oaxaca, Mexico
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This past summer, I participated in the Medical Spanish Immersion program in Oaxaca, Mexico for twelve days. The program offers an opportunity for American medical personnel to learn Spanish while working in hospitals and clinics in the city of Oaxaca. In addition to the hospital and clinic experience, they provide conversation groups and classroom experiences in Spanish grammar, medical vocabulary, salsa, cooking, and many more. While studying in Oaxaca, the program arranges home stay accommodations with families in the city to enhance not only learning the language, but also understanding the Mexican culture and lifestyle.

Oaxaca is one of the three poorest cities in Mexico. In Oaxaca, both the rural and urban populations suffer from a lack of adequate health care. About 50% of the state's population has no access to primary health care, mostly due to the large indigenous population living in rural areas, secluded from the city.

I worked in El Hospital ISSTE, a government funded hospital that provides health care to employees (and their families) of the state. The facility provided secondary and tertiary care for state workers. In general, I found that supplies and technology were scarce, the privacy and rights of the patient are not a concern, and sanitation is not as strictly enforced as it is here. Overall, however, the doctors and nurses are extremely knowledgeable and helpful. Unfortunately, they do not have the luxury of practicing medicine with the same technology or resources that doctors in the United States enjoy.

The family that I stayed with was amazingly hospitable. They were a middle-class family who owned their own dry cleaning business, which they operated out of their home. They all lived together, shared meals together, and worked together. They taught me a lot about the Oaxacan culture and made sure I felt comfortable in their home and city. This family's hospitality was not unique – I found most of the people in Oaxaca to be very warm and very receptive to Americans studying and traveling through their city!

My experience in Oaxaca was certainly one that I will carry with me as I continue to study to become a physician. Even though there are striking differences in their health care, the fundamental aspects remain the same. Patients seeking help for hypertension, diabetes, strokes, and heart attacks are found on both sides of the border. This opportunity enriched my understanding of caring for the “whole patient” since in this situation I faced important cultural and personal customs of the Oaxacan people. I was able to see the role that these customs played in the patients' health and therefore, the role they needed to play in their health care.



