

Leaving Guatemala and AMA's Midwives

|
newcomb@tulane.edu

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Over two months at Asociación Manos Abiertas (AMA) in Ciudad Vieja, Guatemala, I gained a great deal of theoretical and practical knowledge surrounding women's reproductive health. I had the opportunity to attend and assist 6 natural births. In Guatemala, this method of natural, guided delivery provides women lacking access to private medical care with a valuable alternative option to public hospitals, which are notorious for poor patient care and exceedingly high cesarean section rates.

My learning objectives were met. For example, I gained an understanding of biological processes of pregnancy and childbirth; I was introduced to certain vital practices that help mothers and their children to be healthy; I improved my Spanish. But the most unifying lesson I learned is that considering cultural and geographical context is crucial in providing effective patient care. This means that language, approach to treatment, and recommendations must be appropriate with regard to the specific patient and place in question.

In my senior year, I will be finishing Public Health and Gender and Sexuality curriculum. I hope to work in research that will incorporate these fields of study. During my time in Guatemala, I have become more interested in investigating the efficacy of non-traditional treatment methods for numerous health issues. My experience with midwives introduced me to alternative medicinal care, specifically homeopathy. Some of the opinions held by alternative practitioners are in conflict with Public Health experts (for example, it is not uncommon for individuals prescribing to alternative medicine to be anti-vaccine). However, some alternative practices are supported by Public Health or medical research (the World Health Organization recommends a cesarean rate of only about 15%). Because many Americans cannot afford medical care provided by hospitals and private practice, understanding more about the scientific, medical value of home remedies could prove invaluable for those unable to afford professional treatment.

Unfortunately, AMA has begun to experience financial difficulties. Being that it is one of the only clinics of its kind that provides honest, affordable treatment for women by women, it is an immensely safe and valuable service for women in Ciudad Vieja and surrounding areas. Without AMA, many would be without contraceptive, prenatal, childbirth, and postnatal services. Combined with a lack of sexual education, women and infants are at risk for preventable health issues. For more information, here is the website.

For women considering participating in this internship, I urge you to be nearly fluent in Spanish. I missed out on a great deal of interpersonal connections as well as information relayed during patient consultations due to my lack of language skills. Antigua is nearby Ciudad Vieja and has many language schools, teachers, and tutors. It would be a great idea to set up courses that you could attend in the morning before going to the clinic, or to set up a home stay and language course before your time begins at the clinic.