

Medical Student Enrichment Program

University of Alabama at Birmingham Heersink School of Medicine

Clinical Elective: Baní, Dominican Republic – INTEC: Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo

Dates of Training: June 2, 2024 - June 30, 2024

Student: Andy Chae, MS1

Date of Reflection: July 12, 2024

Qué lo que miop,

This international clinical rotation has been a humbling experience that opened my eyes to the various factors that impact medicine and the health of patients.

Participating in a medical clinical rotation in the Dominican Republic has been a transformative experience that has deepened my understanding of healthcare beyond the confines of textbooks and classrooms. This rotation provided me with a unique opportunity to immerse myself in a different cultural and socioeconomic environment, allowing me to witness firsthand the profound impact of language, culture, and socioeconomic factors on patient communication and health outcomes.

Going into the trip, I did not know Spanish at all. Although I had experienced overcoming the language barrier as a Korean American, I had underestimated and forgotten the importance of being able to communicate effectively with patients in their native tongue. I saw myself in my mother's shoes every time I was lost, unable to communicate with the patient. To bridge this language gap, I made a concerted effort to improve my Spanish-speaking skills as I studied Spanish in my room each day after the clinic. I was very grateful to have either Peter, Michael, Sebastian, or Brandon, the four UAB and INTEC students, alongside me at all times as they voluntarily became my tongue and ears to help communicate with patients. Their humbling efforts of kindness are truly what made this trip impactful and worthwhile. I plan to continue studying Spanish throughout medical school in hopes to become tongue and ears to future Spanish-speaking patients.

Cultural competence also played a critical role in my interactions with patients. The Dominican Republic has a rich cultural heritage, and understanding the cultural context of my patients' lives was essential for providing holistic care. I learned that cultural beliefs and practices can significantly influence health behaviors and attitudes towards illness and treatment. For example, I didn't understand why the doctors would ask about tea consumption, only to find out that many mothers would give their babies traditional tea to combat fever and common cold, causing various tea intoxications and respiratory symptoms. By respecting these cultural differences and integrating them into the care plan, we were able to understand the full picture of the patient

case. This experience underscored the necessity of cultural sensitivity in healthcare and the need to tailor interventions to meet the unique needs of each patient.

Our last week of the rotation was at Hospital Infantil Dr. Robert Reid Cabral, the first pediatric hospital established in the nation. I was able to recognize how socioeconomic deficits such as limited access to genetic counseling, inadequate pregnancy care, and lack of education can significantly exacerbate patient outcomes, particularly through mechanisms like vertical transmission and increased risk of genetic diseases. Most of the children were not sick because they acquired the disease; rather, they were born with it. We saw various genetic cases such as sickle cell crisis, Moebius syndrome, and even Patau syndrome. Without genetic counseling, families were unaware of hereditary risks and lacked crucial information to make informed reproductive decisions. Inadequate pregnancy care led to poor maternal health and unfavorable prenatal conditions, increasing the likelihood of complications and adverse outcomes for both mother and child as seen in the mother and child with Zika and HIV. I was devastated to see the child with AIDS having to receive palliative care as he wasn't treated initially.

In conclusion, my medical clinical rotation in the Dominican Republic was an invaluable learning experience that broadened my perspective on healthcare. It taught me the importance of effective communication, cultural competence, and addressing socioeconomic determinants of health. These lessons will profoundly influence my approach to patient care and inspire me to work towards a more equitable healthcare system. The insights gained from this rotation have not only made me a better medical professional but also a more empathetic and culturally sensitive individual.

