

The Spirit of Life Charitable Foundation Scholarship for International Studies

Penn State College of Medicine Global Health Center

Medical Student Program Proposal

Program/ Project Title: MPH Global Health Internship, Bolivia (Tarija) with CFHI Global Health Practicum

Student Name and Contact Information:

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Project Location: Tarija, Bolivia

Project Timetable: 5/17/2025 – 6/22/2025

I learned hands-on the intricacies and workings of the health system in Bolivia while contributing practical solutions to address vector-borne disease. I completed rotations in a primary health center, a health center dedicated to Chagas disease, the internal medicine unit of the largest hospital in Tarija, and in the entomology lab of the public health authority in Tarija. In these rotations, I observed how medicine is practiced at different levels of the healthcare system, the challenges that are faced, and the adaptations that are made in the face of a lack of resources and an excess of patients. Through these rotations, I also learned about vector-borne diseases in Bolivia and programs to control them. I learned that the largest problem in Tarija with combatting these diseases is a lack of money and resources. As a result, I developed recommendations that focused on education and awareness about the diseases, their vectors, and prevention methods. These interventions would reduce the burden of disease, increase treatment seeking of infected individuals, and would be cost effective.

In addition to these rotations and the development of public health recommendations, I also learned about the culture in Tarija. I lived with a host family for the 5 weeks that I was in Bolivia. With this family, I shared meals, stories, and traditions. I also became close with their son and earned enough trust for them to have me run errands for them on the weekends. I also took Spanish lessons during the program. As I was already fluent in Spanish, we used this time to learn more about the culture of Tarija. We traveled to museums and other historic sites where we could practice Spanish and learn the history of the city.

This internship was a great experience that enriched my Spanish proficiency, cultural humility, respect, and compassion. I am very grateful for the opportunity that I had to go on this trip and to make new friends from around the world. This experience greatly deepened my desire to pursue a career in medicine and practice with cultural competence and compassion. For future students engaging in a similar experience, I would recommend for them to learn about the language, culture, and political climate of where they are traveling. While Tarija was very sheltered and safe, Bolivia has a lot of political and economic tension right now that make the country unsafe to travel in.

The internship through Child Family Health International was a great learning experience that provided support and independence. Living with a host family made the experience very immersive and enriching. It is also run by locals in each site, so it provides access to observe medicine in numerous settings.

The largest weakness of this program was the lack of actual impact or contribution that is able to be made as a public health student. With a lack of medical training and only a short period of time in the location, it is difficult to conduct any large public health projects that will make a sizeable difference. The program tries its best to be respectful of local customs and institutions, however.

After this trip, I aspire to become a primary care physician who empowers and works with underserved communities to address health inequities. While this is a desire I had before the trip, this trip deepened my desire and broadened my perspective. This experience also made me much more respectful and understanding of other cultures and how their practices may impact healthcare.

I am very grateful to the Global Health Center and its donors for providing a scholarship that made this trip possible.



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Picture with doctors from the Plataforma de Chagas, a clinic in Tarija dedicated to Chagas disease. We took this photo while saying our goodbyes after a week of me observing and helping in the clinic.



Picture with the three other students in Tarija at the same time as me in front of San Juan de Dios, the tertiary level hospital in Tarija. Me and Rebecca (the girl in the middle) had just finished our last day of rotations and our weekly meeting with the coordinators.



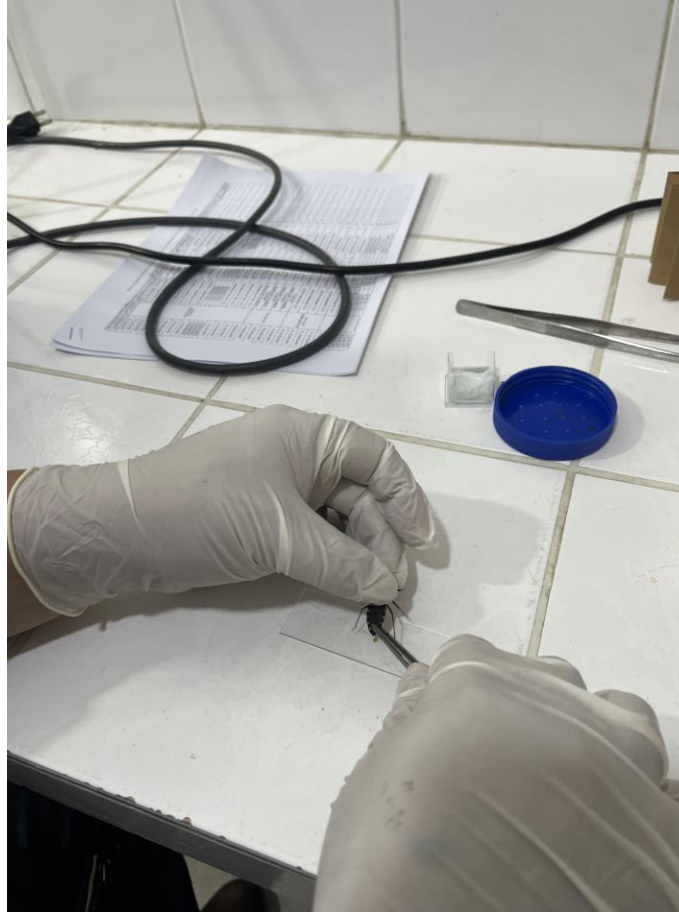
I went on a weekend trip to La Paz from Tarija and hiked up Mount Charquini to Laguna Esmeralda. Here is a picture of me at the base camp of the mountain before hiking up in the cold.



Me and Natalia, another student in Tarija for a CFHI internship. We went on a weekend trip to the Uyuni Salt Flats and took this picture at the nearby train graveyard. We also learned about the history of the train graveyard and its relation to the war with Chile.



Inspecting a kissing bug ("vinchuca") for Chagas, a common parasitic disease in Tarija. I was learning about vector-borne disease biology and control programs in the entomology lab in SEDES (departmental health service) when I got the opportunity to observe this process and was offered the chance to do it myself.



Group picture with CFHI coordinators and other students after I presented on the Bolivian health system, vector-borne diseases, and action lines to improve vector-borne disease control in Tarija. We were sad that it was the last day for me and Rebecca, but we had a great time and became close friends with everyone involved with the program.



Group picture with our Spanish professor (Carolina) and other CFHI students during a day trip to Camargo to learn more of the history and culture of Bolivia, while getting in depth Spanish practice to improve our fluency.



Me and Rebecca took our host family out to lunch on our last day in Tarija before coming back to the US. We had become like family and wanted to do something nice for our host family before leaving.



Me, Rebecca, and our host family taking a break from our evening tea to take a picture. We would have tea every night with our host family where we would spend hours talking and sharing about our experiences.



Me and Rebecca in the house where we were staying for the duration of our time in Tarija. We were very sad to leave and loved the place we were staying in. It was very comfortable and safe, and our host family always tried to make us feel at home.

