

Spirit of Life Foundation Scholarship

Project Location: Oaxaca de Juarez, Oaxaca Mexico

Project Timetable: July 2 - July 28, 2022



Identifying the most common diseases and social determinants of health in the Center de Esperanza infantil (CEI) population



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Summary of Experience

During the first week of my internship, I spent my time taking Spanish classes for 2 hours every evening, observing at a medical clinic outside the city, and learning about the culture/customs of Oaxaca as it relates to medical issues but also individual's daily lives. I attended the clinic for 4 hours every morning along with an hour commute. I went with 4 other students but was placed in the vaccine department myself. I learned a lot about the vaccine process in Mexico and saw a lot of newborns getting their important vaccines. These included Rotavirus, influenza, Hepatitis B, and DTaP. Everything was done by paper and every patient must have a vaccine card for proof and record keeping of vaccinations, and there were different cards for different age groups.

I also got to see two days of a COVID-19 vaccine clinic which was very interesting. This was the first time they were able to vaccinate 5 to 11 year olds, but were also giving first or second doses to 12 to 17 year olds, so there were so many people lined up all around the neighborhood to get into the clinic. Some people even started waiting the night before. I got to observe the nurses administer the vaccines and help them get the syringes ready. It was a very cool experience and I learned a lot more about the healthcare system in Mexico, especially as it relates to vaccination, this week.

The next two weeks I started my work with El Centro de Esperanza Infantil. This is a non-profit organization that works with over 700 children and young adults to sponsor their education. The center works with each student's family as well to assess their needs and helps students from first grade to university education. They provide school supplies, vouchers for uniforms, new shoes, tutoring, computer rooms, hot lunches, tuition payments, and more. The first 2 days I just helped around the center with putting together supplies or completing organization tasks within the center and just tried to learn more about the people the center helps and what their main needs are. Then I was able to start on my project, which first consisted of making a questionnaire that would be sent out to the CEI population. It asked demographic questions, questions on social determinants of health, and health history/current health questions. I received 721 responses which I was able to analyze and use to create a PowerPoint to present to the director and an infographic to share with the students. Although the data wasn't as strong as I expected it to be, I was still able to learn a lot from the results and create work products that are hopefully helpful to the center.

I completed my project within 2 weeks of working at CEI, so during my last week in Oaxaca I got to experience a lot of culture and observe in more clinics. The whole month of July in Oaxaca was a holiday/festival known as the Guelaguetza, and on the last 2 Mondays in July there are the main events which we got to attend. La Guelaguetza is a yearly indigenous cultural event and is celebrated through traditional dances within each group, which is what we saw. It was very cool to see as I have never experienced something so culturally fun and important before, but it was also a great event to learn more about the indigenous groups and Oaxaca's culture and beliefs. There were also multiple parades and mini festivals, like the tamale festival, throughout the whole month which was a really fun experience. The last week I also got to attend another small clinic and a hospital. In the clinic I got to observe one doctor who I saw take a cast off a little boy, remove a birth control implant from a woman, and also put in an implant for another young girl. In the hospital they were still doing a COVID-19 clinic daily, so I got to observe that in a different setting and also help with the paperwork and interact with some patients which was nice.



Learning Achievements

One thing I was really impressed to learn about was Mexico's health care system in terms of insurance and care coverage. There is universal healthcare coverage in Mexico, but there are also private and public sectors. The 3 main insurance coverages are IMSS, ISSSTE, and Seguro Popular. Overall, health insurance is very affordable in Mexico and as I saw, helped a lot of people get the medical care they needed without the barriers of expense. I also learned a lot about the country's vaccine policies. Vaccination for children is mandatory through Mexico's 'Universal Vaccination Program'. This is a very important part of Mexico's health system and requires all children under 5 to get vaccinated and have a vaccination card to keep a timeline and enroll in schools. This vaccination program has been very useful in preventing diseases like polio and measles in the country.



Program Strengths

The program was pretty well organized and helpful with arranging our house stays, tours around the city, language classes, and accommodating to any issues we had. The housing and food arrangements were very good, as well as transportation to the airport or clinics. We also had 3 lectures from a doctor on the health care system in Mexico which was very interesting and educational. The language classes provided were also extremely helpful when trying to adjust to the new culture and city. For my practicum specifically, the communication between myself, the practicum coordinator for CFHI, my preceptor, and the director at CEI, made it very organized and easy to start working right away which was nice as it took away a lot of stress that could have been potentially present.



Program Shortcomings

Although the language classes helped while I was in Oaxaca, I think saying that this is a beginner Spanish placement is a wrong statement. I still practiced before arriving, but the doctor we had main communication with and most of the doctors in the clinics did not speak any English. I obviously really want to practice and learn Spanish, but sometimes it was very hard to communicate or learn. I realize I am in another country and do not expect them to adjust their language for me, but I don't think that CFHI should say you this is a beginner Spanish placement. There weren't many other shortcomings for me. Even with the language barrier I was still able to learn some in the clinics while practicing my Spanish.

Impact

(How has the experience affected your career / education goals?) This experience has furthered my interest in a career in public health, epidemiology, and global health. I really liked working with data to address public health issues in a community and be able to find an impactful way for the results to be used. I would like to learn more about analyzing data for public health research and work with tracking diseases in the epidemiology field. This opportunity abroad also allowed me a unique perspective to see how other health care systems work, which has interested me now more than before. I have learned so much in my four weeks in Oaxaca that I will always carry with me in my future public health career.