

PATIENT CARE

Missions Trip Becomes Life-Changing Experience for EIOH Alumni

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Working for two weeks in an extreme climate and underserved area did not exactly sound like the ideal way to spend precious vacation time for Gregory Cygan, DDS.

But after learning more about the medical and dental missions trip to an undeveloped village in the Honduras, the Eastman Institute for Oral Health resident decided he wanted to give it a try.



“I wanted to spend part of my residency living up to the founding principles of Eastman Dental, which were serving people in the community who did not have access to dental care,” said Dr. Cygan (GPR '14).

Sponsored by Shoulder to Shoulder, an organization that has been helping villages in Intibuca, Honduras for 25 years with basic health care, advanced medicine, dental services, education programs, community health programs, and nutrition. The trip was led by Doug Stockman, MD, the director of Global Health at Highland Family Medicine, who has been working in Honduras since 2003. On this particular trip, Dr. Cygan was joined by fellow EIOH alumna Lina Vega, DDS, MPH (AEGD '09, GPR '10), and nine family medicine residents.



The main goals are to improve the health and welfare of the community while teaching them to become self-sufficient, as well as provide valuable skills to medical and dental residents.

Traveling to the mission site, San Jose, took several hours. Once they finally arrived, Drs. Vega, Cygan and 10 others set up tents.

“Our days would start with sweeping mountain views, a tasty breakfast of fajitas or gringas, eggs and sausage, and several cups of coffee,” Dr. Cygan described. “Temperatures reached a humid 93 degrees each day, which was especially challenging the day we hiked for several miles over rugged terrain to deliver fluoride, educate school children, and take surveys of the community.”

Patients came from nearby villages to receive care, including routine extractions, treatment for infections, preventive and operative dentistry. “Although we did not have the type of outstanding quality of a facility like the Howitt Urgent Care clinic, we were able to provide dental care rapidly and effectively,” Dr. Cygan said. “The patients were so grateful, which I found to be a stark contrast from the many excuses I’ve heard from patients as to why they don’t visit the dentist.” One of many included a young woman with painful facial swelling. She received antibiotics and dental treatment so she could return to her job as a nurse. Adults and especially children, Cygan said, were eager to cooperate and happy to have their needs met.



That’s because access to dental care is essentially nonexistent in the San Jose area. “Most people with dental problems such as rotted teeth or dental abscesses can go months or years in pain,” Dr. Stockman explained. “Having a dentist join our trips alleviates so much suffering for the people of San Jose.”

In 2010, Dr. Vega made her first trip to San Jose as an EIOH resident. She’s been back three times since and is getting ready to travel again in May. She’s the first to say that the patients are not the only ones who benefit from the experience.

“Helping the people of San Jose was the best experience during my time as an Eastman resident and it continues to be,” said Dr. Vega, who looks forward to seeing how the children she’s come to know have grown. “It’s a completely different reality there, and having a hands-on role in improving the life of communities who are working toward sustainable development is so very deeply rewarding.”



Medical and dental providers work side by side and learn so much from each other

“Working in a resource poor environment can improve skills that may even be needed in the U.S. It also helps the traveler realize that 75 percent of humanity lives in developing countries in conditions similar to San Jose,” Dr. Stockman added.



“Prior to this mission trip I did not consider the needs of people outside of the United States,” Dr. Cygan added. “Whereas people in this country have access to services like Medicaid, the people of that small Honduran community do not have insurance or easy access to routine dental care. Daily life is a struggle in itself, with resources like water and food never being quite as certain as it can be for an average American. This experience gave me a new perspective on the value of dental treatment and an individual’s freedom to pursue it.”

Due to poor diets and oral hygiene, many individuals are partially edentulous by their teenage years, making education and prevention key to stopping the cycle. “We provided fluoride rinses, varnishes, and oral hygiene instruction,” Dr. Cygan explained. “We visited many of the community schools to teach children about oral hygiene and give their teachers the instructions for fluoride rinses to apply weeks and months later. A few of the talented family medicine residents sang songs to the children about tooth brushing to the tune of ‘La Bamba.’”

“It was very fulfilling to help the people of this small community in Central America,” Dr. Cygan added. “This trip afforded me many privileges such as the opportunity to immerse myself in the Spanish language, learn about a different culture, and provide dental care for the underserved.”

If you are interested in learning more about Shoulder to Shoulder or would like to get involved yourself, please contact: or visit www.sanjosepartners.org or www.urmc.rochester.edu/family-medicine/global-health/

About Dr. Cygan

After earning his DDS at the University of Illinois at Chicago, he joined Eastman’s GPR program.

“Eastman Dental allowed me opportunities to work in the operating room with Dr. Wayne Lipschitz and increase my clinical skills through the hundreds of patients seen in Urgent Care with Dr. Linda Rasubala. Since recently completing the GPR Program at Eastman, I am happy to say that it has been a memorable experience thanks to people like my fellow co-residents and Dr. James Burk, who was supportive in making this opportunity possible for me, and my hope is that there is continued involvement in the project.”



Today, Dr. Cygan is in private practice as a general dentist in Arlington Heights, Illinois, and is looking forward to beginning an oral surgery internship at West Virginia University this summer.



San Jose is in the southwest Honduras in the Department of Intibucá. Natives refer to this part of the country as *la frontera* (the frontier) because it is so undeveloped. Many adults are illiterate and are unable to complete grade school. San Jose Centro is in a dry mountainous region. There is a lot of elevation variation, hiking from town to town and very little flat land. Farming must be done on steep mountainsides. San Jose residents deal with a dry season and no rain for six months. There are no factories or major industries nearby. The government is the largest employer with most jobs in education and bureaucracy. In small plots,

residents grow corn, beans and squash; fruit such as mango, banana, pineapple and coffee are also grown. Almost every family must leave San Jose for about 3 months a year and harvest coffee in other parts of Honduras and El Salvador. A fast working adult male can make about \$6/day picking coffee.

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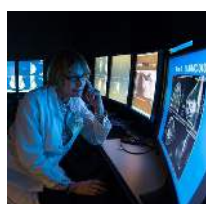
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