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Message from the FMIG Advisor

Volunteer - to offer oneself for some service or undertaking. This newsletter captures the spirit of volunteerism through the voices of a fourth year medical student, a third year Family Medicine resident and a seasoned attending. Each has a story to share about the changes volunteering has made in their lives and give them the strength and passion to continue to serve patients every day. I am proud to know each of them. Please read their words to be inspired as I know I am by Family Physicians I meet every day.

Allison Macerollo, M.D.
My final clinical experience in medical school was like no other clerkship, rotation, or preceptorship I have completed in all four years of my medical education. As part of a longitudinal Global Health elective, I participated in an eight-day medical mission trip to Choluteca, Honduras. A team of undergraduate nursing students and Spanish majors, nurse practitioner students, pharmacy students, 4th year medical students, and faculty from the Colleges of Nursing, Pharmacy, and Medicine came together to serve the farming communities in and around Choluteca. The people in these communities look forward to the yearly visit from Ohio State, because, outside of this, they have little to no access to health care. This yearly mission trip not only provides the people with high-quality health care in the midst of very few resources, but, thanks to donations from individuals, families, and organizations, we are able to offer the people plenty of free medications, personal care items, clothes, shoes, toothbrushes and toothpaste, and even write referrals to Honduran physicians for more serious conditions that require further evaluation and/or follow up.

My main interest lies in healthcare for the underserved, so when I heard that this elective was open to fourth year medical students for the first time, I jumped on the opportunity. Little did I know how much this experience would shape me as a (soon-to-be) physician. Each day, we would set up makeshift Primary Care and Women’s Health clinics, along with a pharmacy, usually in the local schoolhouses. On this trip, I was given the autonomy to see patients on my own, make assessments, and write prescriptions as a provider. At the same time, faculty members were always available if I had questions or needed guidance. I got plenty of practice caring for patients with many of the chronic conditions Family Physicians in the US see, including Type II Diabetes, Hypertension, GERD, chronic pain, asthma, and seasonal allergies. Patients also presented with acute problems, like rashes, UTIs, kids with fevers, otitis media, and parasitic infections. I saw pregnant women, and even got to practice the Leopold maneuvers, fundal height measurement, and finding the fetal heartbeat with a Doppler. I was kept on my toes daily, needing to calculate dosages when writing prescriptions for pediatric patients.
The nurse practitioner students and medical students were each paired with an undergraduate RN student who would take vitals, check the kids’ hair for lice, and check the blood glucose of the adults. This set up gave me the chance to act as a teacher in the clinical setting. I spent one day in the Women’s Health clinic, performing pelvic exams and Pap smears, and assessing and treating STIs (without the assistance of labs or a microscope...the mantra of the trip was “if you think the patient needs treatment, then treat!” This may be their only opportunity to receive antibiotic treatment). This setting really challenges one to hone and rely on history-taking and physical exam skills, because the confirmatory tests we have in the states are not available at these makeshift village clinics...Well, to be fair, we did have a urine dip, but that was about it in the way of “labs.” Needless to say, my clinical decision-making was developed quickly on this trip.

I learned so much and want to share so many things from my eight-day experience in Honduras, but a lot of what I’d like to express cannot be put into words. It was more than an amazing opportunity to put to work my Spanish minor and all that I’ve learned in four years of med school. It helped to prepare me for intern year, and gave me the confidence that, although I have much to learn, I have what it takes and I will do well as I grow into my role of Family Physician. As I mentioned earlier, I’m passionate about underserved medicine. Through this experience, I learned firsthand that being underserved in a developing country is quite different from being underserved in the US. In the US, one may not have health insurance, but an ER will always care for a patient in need. In developing countries, a lot of times, there is no ER; if there is one, the resources are often few, the technology lacking, and it may be so far from the patient’s village that they could never make the journey. This trip drew my attention to these differences, making me grateful for all of the resources we have and the care we are able to offer to patients in the US, but also igniting a fire within me for Global Health. With our broad scope of knowledge and clinical practice, family docs can be such valuable members of a Global Health team. I hope to make these kinds of trips a regular part of my future practice as a Family Physician.

Whitney Christian, MS4
Volunteerism

When I was about to graduate from high school, someone gave me a card w/ a list in it titled “How to succeed in College and Life” by Robert Louis Stevenson. One of the items on the list read “Do what you can for those less fortunate than yourself.” I kept that list in my wallet up until about 2 years ago when it was so tattered that it was crumbling and I couldn’t read it anymore. The list had a total of twelve items, and I believe that was one of the most important pieces of advice. Throughout my life, I’ve come to realize that any time I have spent volunteering has been worth its weight in gold, and that it has given me in return way more than I could have ever realized going in to do each event.

In high school, I started volunteering at the hospital working the front desk, answering phones, delivering messages, and transporting patients. It was here that I realized my interest in the medical field. Through volunteering, I met the lab staff, and landed my first job in the medical field as a phlebotomist. The job wasn’t something I was actually looking for- they approached me and offered it. I took the job, and then became more acquainted with the doctors in the hospital. I never expected so much would come simply from answering phones as a junior in high school.

In undergrad, I joined a volunteering-dedicated honor society called Golden Key, mainly because I had stopped volunteering for a while, and wanted to get back into it. Over the next 2 years with Golden Key, I was elected president of the group, traveled to California and Arizona for free, organized and worked at soup kitchens, built houses, sold flowers, cleaned up yards and highways, helped with special Olympics, MRDD bowling, MRDD swimming, MRDD roller skating, and raised funds for relay for life. All in all, we had over 500 volunteer hours in our organization that year. And although it seemed overwhelming spending a lot of time organizing these events, I wouldn’t trade one minute of my time there. I also have to mention that there was another member in this group I met, and over time and getting to know each other started dating, and now we have been married for over 3 years, and have a 3-month-old child. I mention this because you will never know what kind of great things (or people) will come out of volunteering your time.
I traveled to Mexico on a medical missions trip, and also to Swaziland (Africa) as part of a medical school global health program. I think it should be a requirement to travel abroad and spend time helping the underserved in other countries because it is so thought provoking. Through this, I realized that we take so much for granted in our daily lives here. We hear so many people complaining around us when we really should be thankful for how easy we have it.

In my 3 years of residency and during medical school working in free clinics, I began to realize how rewarding it is to provide free care. Of all the patient populations, these are some of the most sick or disabled patients, and yet they are so thankful for your time. I also believe it is just as therapeutic to the doctor as it is to the patient- there’s a certain happiness that resonates with people who spend their time volunteering. So the next time you are feeling down, frustrated, overwhelmed, or if you just have some spare time, go volunteer at the local clinic, YWCA/YMCA, church group, or soup kitchen- I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised how fruitful of an experience it is. It makes me realize if you take away all the insurance and financial aspects of medicine, you really see what it means to have the knowledge to help someone feel better. And I think when all the other extraneous aspects of medicine are boiled away, this is why we do what we do- to help, and heal, and make the world around us just a little better.

Ryan S. Foster, MD
PGY3, Grant Family Medicine Residency
My Commitment to Volunteering

"I expect to pass through this world but once; any good thing therefore that I can do, let me do it now; for I shall not pass this way again."

This is a quote I have learned from my grand father. A quote which resonates with me all the days of my life.

This is my guide especially when I am tired and feel like sleeping or lying around is much better than going to the free clinic. I just remember what I have promised/committed myself into. It starts at 5 PM every other Friday night, every month, 12 months a year. This is a commitment I have made as a volunteer physician at Columbus Helping Hands Free Clinic since April 2007. It is not easy to do all the time but it is the right thing to do.

The moment I start seeing patients, hearing their stories . . . that feeling knowing I am in the right place captures my spirit. This is a feeling I always get when I volunteer . . . most probably one of the reasons why I keep doing it.

My commitment to volunteering stems from that desire to help make somebody's load easier to carry. This may be temporary or long lasting. It does not matter to me. Volunteering always feels right, it makes me happy, it makes all my worries go away, it helps me place things in perspective . . . all of these and more.

The stories I hear from patients and lessons I learn are like precious gems I keep in my soul. When a time calls for me to seek their strength - I just look in to help keep me going.

There was a woman who was dressed in a traditional African garment - vividly colored, well crafted and worn regally. She was there for her blood pressure issue. When I started asking questions - I asked her about diet, her answer was she eats a lot of ramen noodles. I then advised her the perils of the salt content from ramen noodles. She listened very carefully and when I was done - she informed me she was sharing 2 packs of ramen noodles with 6 other family members and friends every night since that's all they can afford. She was an accountant back in her country and escaped death by walking for almost a whole night away from all her family and all those she loves. She lost a foot in the process but survived to tell her story. Now she is trying to learn English so she can work and send money/help to her family she left behind.

Another patient encounter which remained with me even now was a patient who I almost did not see since he was late signing in. One of the staff heard this and brought him to my attention. I ended up seeing him and was rewarded with the most dazzling smile the moment I entered the room. He ended up as one of our more compliant patients despite him not having any motorized transportation. He comes from South America, speaks halting English but with translator and a lot of miming or using computer pictures - we understood each other. He would walk for 2 - 3 hours one way every time he had an appointment to see us just so he could get medical help. I never knew this until one of the social worker pointed it out to me. A bus ticket voucher was offered him which he gratefully accepted. This arrangement worked well for him until we did not have vouchers available. He just said - I still have feet which can take me anywhere . . . and so began the walking again.
The last one I am going to share is a story of a young man who stayed every night in a homeless shelter since he lost his job. One day he fell off one of the bunk beds and hurt his shoulder. This was how he came to us. One day - he found a job listed in one of our announcement board. He asked if he could have a work physical which he got and passed. He applied and was hired. One day he came in the free clinic and when I saw him I asked him if he signed up already. He answered, I did but not as a patient. With this big smile on his face - he said this time he was a volunteer. He wanted to give back.

These are just but a few rambling thoughts of a volunteer. I will end this with a quote which I know will resonate with all the volunteers . . .

“Volunteers are not paid – not because they are worthless, but because they are priceless.” Sherry Anderson

Maria Riza Conroy, M.D.
Clinical Assistant Professor of Family Medicine
Thank you! Thank you!

FMIG appreciates the financial support of the Columbus family medicine residencies:
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