From the classroom to the field: MSU nursing students apply skills during trip to Honduras

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Montana State University nursing student Paula Trembath is trained in using advanced nursing skills, but the highlight of a recent MSU-sponsored trip to Honduras involved simply helping an elderly woman manage pain.

Trembath hiked with another nursing student and a Honduran health care worker to the home of a woman in her 70s who had a dislocated hip.

"Because there were no roads and she couldn't be transported, there was little we could do for her," said Trembath, 23. "But we gave her some Tylenol and a muscle relaxant. We talked to her and she was so happy we came... We do come from completely different worlds, but at the same time, there is a basic human connection."

Trembath was one of 10 MSU nursing students who recently traveled to Honduras as part of a senior-level nursing course. While there, the students provided health care in dozens of homes, distributed water filters, conducted health education fairs, provided education about clean water, held adult clinics in remote villages and covered calls in a central clinic. In the process, the students experienced the challenges and rewards of delivering health care services in a rural environment with scarce resources.

That the environment was so different from what students were accustomed to was precisely what made the experience so valuable, said trip leader Martha Arguelles, an adjunct nursing professor on the MSU College of Nursing's Billings campus.

"The students visited rural homes to make assessments," she said. "They talked to people about their daily concerns. Many individuals were barefoot and malnourished. The roads are steep and rocky, with no pavement and few vehicles. Home visits often meant climbing steep trails, climbing fences and occasionally crossing streams. Once at the home, the visit was conducted amongst feral dogs, roosters, chickens, cows and an occasional scorpion. It was very far removed from a hospital or clinic setting.

"The students saw how difficult it is to get health care if you have to walk two hours," Arguelles added. "They saw how the villagers there have few resources to take care of themselves. Even a toothbrush is a prized item."

Ten Montana State University nursing students representing three campuses traveled to Honduras Jan. 22-Feb. 4 for a service-learning trip. While there, the students provided health care in dozens of homes, distributed water filters, conducted health education fairs, provided education about clean water, held adult clinics in remote villages and covered calls in a central clinic. In the process, they experienced the challenges and rewards of delivering health care services in a rural environment with scarce resources. MSU nursing students Ariel Borden-Deal, left, and Monica Lee are pictured here with a Honduran patient. Photo courtesy of Frank Kammerer Photography.
Through their experiences in Honduras, the MSU nursing students addressed difficult questions about providing care, such as "How do you tailor health care to specific needs in a resource-poor environment? How can you deliver quality nursing when there isn't a hospital and resources are scarce? How can nurses make a difference in the world?"

Jan Ostermiller, 36, an MSU student on the Billings campus who traveled with the group, said she has an underlying desire to serve others.

"There are people who are in need in our own communities, and I believe it's absolutely necessary to take care of those people," Ostermiller said. "But (traveling abroad) also gives (students) a broader perspective about what's happening in areas of the world that are underdeveloped."

Ostermiller, who grew up in Glasgow and Billings, appreciated the focus on prevention in Honduras.

"It was really back to the basics," she said. "We went to a community where they don't necessarily have all of the treatment measures we have here, so the focus was on prevention. We really need to remember that the best treatment is prevention."

Before traveling to Honduras, the students did research about what to expect.

"One thing that really got me was how little infrastructure there is," Trembath said. "Access -- including access to education, clean water, transportation and health care -- is a big part of the issue."

And, the students applied a great deal of what they learned from previous MSU courses while they were in Honduras.

"This trip was extremely valuable because we got to use all of the skills we've gained so far," Trembath said. "We used our skills in (obstetrics), pediatrics and psychiatric assessment. The trip was really a culmination. We couldn't have done it without the rest of the nursing program."

Now, Trembath looks forward to applying what she learned in Honduras to her future work.

"Some of the things I learned down there I can apply here. We go down with the impression that we're going to teach them everything, but they teach us a lot," she said.

Ostermiller holds a similar view.

"Any sort of experience that takes you out of what you're used to, out of your element, helps you become less biased when you look at people and the situations they come from," she said. "It gives us a more worldly view of health care as opposed to our isolated views of the world."

Eighteen students representing MSU's five nursing campuses in Bozeman, Billings, Great Falls, Kalispell and Missoula applied for the trip's 10 available spots, Arguelles said. Students from three campuses were selected to go. The students who participated were part of a larger group of approximately 45 people, including translators and individuals from several other universities. The trip was also affiliated with Shoulder to Shoulder, a Honduran non-profit organization.

In addition to the nursing care the students provided, faculty from MSU's College of Nursing donated funds for more than 50 ceramic water filters to distribute in southern Honduras. Ceramic water filters are a low-cost method of removing bacteria that causes sickness from drinking water, Arguelles said.

Arguelles is planning to take another group of students to Honduras in November and hopes to establish the trip as a permanent option for MSU nursing students in their senior year.

"This was a very transformative experience," Arguelles said. "Students came back energized by this experience, and they saw the impact that they could make as nursing students, and often despite language limitations....They could see the deeper meaning in the trip."
Trembath noted that the students' presence in the remote locations was one of the "greatest gifts" they could give.

"The nursing knowledge we have is very valuable," she said.

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