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2010-05-21: Seeking to start a tradition of care

Greg St. Martin
Northeastern University

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#### Seeking to start a tradition of care



Graduate student Abby Canner treats patients in the Mayan villages in Guatemala over spring break.

Courtesy photo

#### May 21, 2010

Over spring break, a team of graduate students in the physician assistant program at Northeastern University embarked on a unique **experiential learning** opportunity, bringing badly needed medical care to remote Mayan villages in Guatemala.

The Northeastern team included 10 students in the first year of the program — Abby Canner, Lindsey Carlomagno, Judy Chen, Catherine Crosby, Jeffrey Dabkowski, Lauren Dorr, Stephanie Ferello, Jeanne Jacobs, Erin Kelly and Kristen Nicolescu — and one second-year student, Amy Hanscom.

The team left Boston on April 16, flying into Honduras and driving

four-and-a-half hours to Rio Dolce, Guatemala, bringing with them 250 pounds of medications from the United States.

There, they met Bryan Buchanan, aka "the Jungle Medic," who hosts groups of doctors at his medical facility. Buchanan arranges for visiting medical professionals and students to take his bus-turned-traveling medical clinic to villages deep in the mountains and jungles.

The Northeastern team treated 930 people over five days of clinics. Dabkowski, one of the trip's lead organizers, said one lasting impression he got from the experience was realizing how simple medications that people in America take for granted can have such a profound impact on people in less developed parts of the world.

"Many people don't think twice about what a glass of orange juice does for our health, or the daily multivitamins we take," he said. "For some of these people [in the villages] it allows them to go to school or it fixes a (nutritional) deficiency."

In the villages, long lines of anxious but thankful patients formed hours before they arrived. Many villagers they encountered desperately needed antibiotics, vitamins and dental care. Children often required cough medicine and medication for worms they developed from walking barefoot. The adults — who spend much of their days working in the fields cutting down trees with machetes and carrying heavy loads of corn on their heads — were often provided over-the-counter pain medications.

"Some people came a long way for just a bag of Vitamin C," Dabkowski said of the villagers, whose meals typically consist only of corn tortillas.

When the fall semester begins, the team plans to make a presentation to the new class of first-year physician assistant students to highlight their learning opportunity in Guatemala, which they organized and paid for themselves. The team hopes to pique other students' interest about making a trip of their own.

"We hope to turn this into a Northeastern tradition," Dabkowski said.

For more information, please contact Greg St.Martin at 617-373-5463 or at g.stmartin@neu.edu.

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