

ELECTIVE INTERNATIONAL ROTATION

Spanish Immersion, Community Health Outreach and Clinical Care in Costa Rica

Course Directors:

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Time: 4-week blocks in February & July

This elective course is a capstone Spanish immersion experience for Phase IV MD students, Medical residents and other healthcare students (PA, BSN, APN, PT, MPH) in the clinical phase of their training. It consists of home stays with Costa Rican families, intensive classroom instruction in Spanish, and public health outreach and clinical care in resource-poor communities in Costa Rica. It is for students who are passionate about providing care to disadvantaged patients in the United States or abroad and who are committed to improving their Spanish language skills.

Course description

This course includes several key elements:

- **Intensive classroom instruction in Spanish.** In small groups (typically 3-4 students), students will study medical and general conversational Spanish. Classes are taught by experienced Costa Rican Spanish teachers. Classes are organized according to students' Spanish proficiency.
- **Preventive health educational talks (*charlas*).** Students will work in small, inter-disciplinary teams, along with physician assistant, pharmacy and nursing students. Together, they will prepare and present a variety of educational talks to impoverished and underserved communities. Typically, these *charlas* focus on nutrition, drug or alcohol problems, general hygiene, oral health, prenatal care, injury prevention, health maintenance, immunizations, STDs or other preventive health topics. Among the sites that students may visit are El Alfarero Comunidad Terapeutica (a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center), Cristo Rey de Cartago, Hogar Biblico, Bajo Los Anonos, El Triangulo de la Solidaridad, and La Carpio (a poor, crowded village of Nicaraguan refugees). Students' presentations are coordinated by Common Ground International, in close cooperation with La Fundación Humanitaria Costarricense, Children Without Borders, Obras del Espiritu Santo and other Costa Rican humanitarian organizations.
- **Ambulatory clinical care.** This immersion elective focuses on education and outreach; less emphasis is placed on direct patient care. Nonetheless, students will gain practical experience in interviewing, teaching and communicating with patients who have a variety of unmet health care needs. Students will learn how collaboration among physicians, physician assistants, pharmacists, nurses and other providers can help in efforts to provide comprehensive, patient-centered care to patients in impoverished and underserved communities. While participating in a variety of outreach activities, students will also see first-hand how health status is affected by poverty, crowding, unemployment, poor education and lack of social supports.
- **Health care seminars and related readings.** Common Ground International hosts a series of seminars and lectures, in which local professionals are invited to speak about common public health problems in Costa Rica, the national health care system, health disparities, use of home remedies and medicinal plants and barriers to medical care in under-served populations. Students will be assigned a Medical Mission Handbook and several articles that focus on cultural aspects of medical care in

Costa Rica and other Latino populations and various ethical challenges that arise when medical teams provide health care abroad.

- **Hospital tours.** Students will have the opportunity to visit local public and private hospitals and clinics, in order to learn more about the facilities, the providers and the standards of care.
- **Costa Rican host families.** Home stays with a local host family are a crucial component of the language and cultural immersion experience. These families are caring, knowledgeable, supportive of our students and non-English speaking.

Why this elective?

In the coming decades, in almost every geographic region and every health care setting, physicians will be asked to care for diverse populations of patients. This *Spanish Immersion* elective will help prepare physicians for their new careers in several ways. Students who complete this elective will be able to communicate more confidently with Spanish-speaking patients. Students will graduate from medical school with a heightened awareness of, and respect for, their patients' family and cultural values. Students will understand the value of multi-cultural and inter-disciplinary health care provider teams. And students will have seen first-hand how the social, environmental, language-related, community and economic backgrounds of their patients contribute to "health disparities." Perhaps most important, students who complete this elective are likely to leave with a renewed sense of confidence and optimism: Because this course combines classroom instruction, self-study, ambulatory care and community visits and *charlas*, students will see the positives --- how dedicated teams of bilingual and culturally-aware professionals can work together to improve the health of patients and communities.

Prerequisites

It is expected that students will have studied Spanish, at least at the "Advanced Beginner" level. Knowing medical terminology in Spanish is an advantage, but not a requirement for this rotation.

Evaluation

Students will be graded on a pass-fail basis. Assignment of grades will be based upon completion of assignments, classroom participation, enthusiasm for speaking Spanish, and participation in the *charlas*, outreach clinics and health promotion activities.

Required Preparation and Reading:

- Prior to registering for this elective, all students must review and affirm the principles included in [The International Medical Spanish Immersion Program Mission Statement](#) (also attached to this document). This mission statement defines seven principles of ethical and respectful international health care, including: pre-departure preparation by all students and preceptors; collaboration with local providers and public health officials; proper supervision of students in all clinical settings; delivery of professional, patient-centered care; coordination of care with local providers, including attention to medical record-keeping, patient safety, appropriate use of pharmaceuticals and follow-up care; communication with local providers and other experts; and program evaluation.
- Other required reading:
 - Suchdev P, Ahrens K, Click E, Macklin L, Evangelista D, Graham E. Model for Sustainable Short-Term International Medical Trips. *Ambulatory Pediatrics*. 2007; 7:317-320.
<http://www2.aap.org/sections/ich/CHIMPS%20Amb%20Peds%20July%2007.pdf>.

- Green T, Green H, Scandlyn J, Kestler A. Perceptions of short-term medical volunteer work: A qualitative study in Guatemala. *BioMed Central Globalization and Health*. 2009; 5:4.
- The *Medical Spanish Immersion in Costa Rica: Program Handbook*, provided by Common Ground International. The Handbook includes additional reading assignments and travel information to help student prepare for their work in Costa Rica.
- **Reflective Writing:** During the immersion elective in Costa Rica, students will be required to reflect, and write, about one or more topics pertaining to what they have seen, heard, learned or felt in Costa Rica. Among the possible topics: the commonalities of health, healthcare and humanism across countries and cultures; the challenges of providing ethical, sustainable medical care in foreign countries; international medical care as a catalyst for future work in resource-poor communities in the United States; and how living and working in Costa Rica may provide an “adjusted lens” for viewing immigrant populations in the United States.

APPENDIX

Medical Spanish Immersion Program Mission Statement

Common Ground International aims to provide its Spanish Immersion Program participants with training and experiences that will help them develop their oral and intercultural communication skills such that they may effectively communicate with native Spanish speakers. Whether this is a personal or professional goal, we will help participants reach it through a combination of pre-departure preparation, language and cultural immersion at the program site, and service to the local community.

Common Ground International and all participants in its medical programs seek to provide ethical and respectful outreach services that address local health care needs in the host country. “Ethical and respectful” services will necessarily include:

- **Preparation:** Before travelling abroad, students and preceptors will acquire as thorough an understanding of local medical and public health needs as possible. Students and preceptors will also work to strengthen their Spanish language skills both before and during the program through reading, self-study and formal language courses. Whenever possible, Common Ground International will arrange meetings between students and local health care experts, in order to familiarize students with health care infrastructure, common health conditions and beliefs, and local health care practices.
- **Collaboration:** Our students, preceptors and program coordinators will work in close partnership with local providers, public health officials and humanitarian organizations. Participants will take part in existing efforts designed and guided by these local entities, so that they may gain a more comprehensive understanding of local health care and contribute to local health care priorities in a culturally appropriate and sustainable manner, despite short-term involvement.
- **Supervision:** In all clinical care settings, students and other trainees will be appropriately supervised. They will understand that they are working under, and not in place of, local health providers.
- **Patient-centered care:** Students and preceptors will understand their limits and will not practice outside their scope of training and competency. The fundamental tenets of medical professionalism, including humanism, respectful communication, confidentiality, empathy, integrity and putting patients’ interests first, are as applicable in resource-poor international settings as at home.
- **Integration:** Most students and preceptors will have only a short-term presence in the host country. Therefore, all volunteer clinical services must be coordinated and integrated with local medical, nursing, pharmacy and other providers. Attention must be paid to medical record-keeping, patient safety, appropriate use of pharmaceuticals, follow-up care and existing provider-patient relationships. Wherever possible, we will look for opportunities to work alongside local health care providers.
- **Communication:** We will communicate regularly with local health providers and other experts; feedback, reflection and critique are essential to ensure that the *charlas*, outreach activities and medical care services we offer are culturally appropriate and address local health care priorities.
- **Program evaluation:** Common Ground International will obtain regular feedback from directors of humanitarian organizations, community leaders, local health care providers, patients, students and other program participants, in order to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of all medical care and outreach activities.

We recognize the preceding components as forming an important connection between our educational and medical goals: While these elements are crucial to the ethics of medical engagement abroad, they are also an important guide for students and providers who seek to provide public health and medical care services in resource-poor cities and communities in the United States.