

Medical care in Guatemala

To the Editor: In the Editorial Comment in *CME* of Nov/Dec 2011, you refer to experiences your friends had in the local public health sector – generally good – which you contrast with the poor care your father received in the private health sector, especially regarding the standard of nursing care.

I recently experienced medical care in a small Central American country – this brought home to me a very important lesson, i.e. that good medical care is not solely achieved by throwing money around and buying the latest bright and shiny equipment, but by good, caring medical and nursing staff and attention to basic principles of good nursing and maintaining what you have.

Last October I travelled to Guatemala with a group of friends to visit the Mayan ruins in the jungle. We flew to a small town, Flores, in Petén Province, in a little plane to visit the pyramids of Tikal and to hike through the rain forest to the ruins. We were scheduled to leave the hotel at 05h00, but I overslept, to be awakened by banging on my door. I hastily dressed, grabbed my kit and rushed down the three flights of stone steps barefoot, only to miss my footing halfway down, doing a pirouette in mid-air and to come crashing down to land flat on my back on the landing below.

The strange thing about being in an accident situation is how time slows down and one has time to have a million thoughts flashing through one's head, such as 'Now I've really broken my neck/back/skull', and 'How am I ever going to get out of this "Pofadder of Guatemala" and get to a city for some decent

medical attention as I want a scan, as I am sure I will develop a subdural'. My head landed last of all and the pain was immense, blood gushed out of an 8 cm laceration at the back of my head and I yelled a primeval scream from deep within.

There were people, hotel towels and torrents of Spanish. I was put in a 'combi' and within minutes I was in a small, whitewashed building – the Centro Medico Maya – to be met by a female doctor and a nurse. I was put on an examination couch, my wound was washed well, I was given a local anaesthetic and I was stitched in a trice. An antibiotic and diclofenac were administered and I was asked about tetanus. Then I was taken to the X-ray room, radiographs were taken with a very old and basic machine, but the quality was good and no fractures were seen. The doctor, Sonia De Baldizon, said that she would however like me to have a CT scan and – yes – there was a CT scanner in town. A taxi with a cracked windscreen and a swinging Virgin Mary dangling from the rear-view mirror took me to the scanner, where the radiologist, in a football jersey, did the scan and showed me that all was NAD. The recent World Cup helped to established which part of the world I was from (remember when it was Chris Barnard who identified one's country of origin?).

I was admitted to the Centro Medico Maya for two days (that I didn't break anything was quite extraordinary). The place needed a coat of paint and was very basic, but the care I received was outstanding. There are only four beds and a very respectable operating room with anaesthetic equipment, which I was interested in, being an ex-anaesthetist. Dr De Baldizon is a surgeon who trained in

Guatemala City and runs the little clinic with her husband, a physician, and two others, a paediatrician and a gynaecologist. They practise far from a big centre but I could sense that they render the local community an excellent service.

It was spotless; someone mopped my room five times a day and I was taken to have regular cold showers, which were very welcome in the tropical heat (actually, there was no hot water). The nurse, Nora, put ice on my bruises and aching parts of my body and later massaged my stiff neck, back and limbs. I had a little battery-powered buzzer and when I pressed it, she came running to attend to me.

I cannot fault the care I received and even though no-one spoke any English and my Spanish is limited to *ola!*, we managed to communicate, with much laughter at times. This is not a wealthy country and has had recent natural disasters in the form of heavy rains, mudslides with loss of life, even earthquakes and a volcanic eruption as recent as May 2010.

I learnt a humbling lesson there. Good, caring nursing doesn't cost anything and as a doctor from a country which is debating a new national health service, it is my fervent hope that we do not lose sight of the fact that if we practise good basic medicine and if our nurses are caring, compassionate and treat our patients well, we cannot go wrong.

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