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First Steps Launch Medical Resident Exchange Program

By Michael Stone

In January, representatives from Michigan State University and its longtime partner in hospital education, Sparrow Health System, landed in Merida, the capital of the Mexican state of Yucatan.

One of the first things they noticed was the care given to keeping the city squeaky clean.

"The minute we arrived in that area, there was not a scrap of paper or trash anywhere in the community — in the parks, the neighborhoods, nothing on the ground," said Thomas Drabek, Sparrow's graduate medical education operations manager.

The beautification stems from the pride the almost 1 million residents take in the city, Drabek said, and it falls in line with the work being done by Yucatan Gov. Rolando Zapata Bello to improve his constituents' overall wellbeing.

Tops among such efforts is to improve health and preventative care, which sparked the new Global Health: Medical Residency Exchange Program joining MSU, Sparrow and the Yucatan Department of Health. The program will be coordinated through the MSU College of Osteopathic Medicine.

The January trip brought the program's ideas to paper, as Ted Glynn, MD, FACEP, Sparrow's vice president of medical education, signed a letter of interest on behalf of the hospital that establishes how the exchange will work.

First, starting in July or August, Sparrow medical residents will travel to the state-run Hospital General Agustin O'Horan in Merida.

Drabek — who calls the joint effort an “academic medical mission” — said the number of Sparrow residents and how long they'll be staying hasn't been set yet.

“I can't make any residents go there, but we've had people over the years who have said to us, ‘We would like to get this kind of experience,’” he said. “Some of that comes from their Christian background; some of it comes from an interest in helping somebody else.

“Everybody has their reasons why they want to do something from a global perspective.”

To complete the exchange, two medical residents from O'Horan will travel to Sparrow to observe doctors there. “They may listen to some breath sounds,” Drabek said, “but for the most part, (they'll be) medical observers.”

The exchange program is the latest outcome from a trip to O'Horan MSU's Reza Nassiri, DSc, took half a decade ago.

As director of Michigan State University's Institute of International Health and its associate dean of global health, Nassiri made the journey to conduct a needs assessment of the hospital, and he quickly noticed something missing.

“When they were showing me the different clinical departments in the hospital,” he said, “I asked them, ‘Where is your kidney dialysis unit?’ And they said, ‘Well, we don't have one.’ So that perked me to ask more questions about, ‘Where do you send your patients?’”

Patients, he found out, would often have to travel far to find private medical care for dialysis. Some died.

Nassiri also saw how doctors were being so flooded with patients from all over the region that they could spend hardly any time with specific ones. “It was like every few minutes, you have a new patient — boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.”

Nassiri returned from that trip with the idea for MSU's first partnership in Yucatan.

Thanks to additional help from nonprofits Project CURE and the Bridge of Life Foundation, the work in Yucatan has been a “great success,” Nassiri said.

It helped O'Horan establish the state's first kidney dialysis unit and put a greater emphasis on satellite clinics to provide care outside the main campus, distributing the patient load. Nassiri also made the suggestion that O'Horan install signs written not only in Spanish, but also in Maya to accommodate the many Mayan patients.

Another feature of the MSU-Yucatan partnership that has blossomed is a week-long study abroad program in community medicine for undergraduates and first-year medical students. Since 2012, the program coincides every year with Spring Break.

MSU undergraduate senior Sonam Sethi went on the abroad program and described its holistic approach to health care: visiting with physicians; studying the relation between public health and medicine; hearing about the indigenous Mayan people and their culture; and experiencing the differences between the U.S. and Mexico in sanitation, medical access and doctor-patient relationships.

“I think the most exciting part for me, though, was when we got to see a live child birth at a maternity clinic,” said Sethi, who plans to get her master’s in public health and focus on health management and policy.

Nassiri is hoping the upcoming exchange program for medical residents matures, too — though he acknowledges everything will come down not to aspiration but funding.

“These things are easy to establish but very difficult to sustain,” said Nassiri, who has traveled to more than 150 countries in his 30-plus years of working in international medicine. “The major issue here is not whether we are ready for them; the major issue is finances for both sides. “

The exchange program is funded by Sparrow, O’Horan and a small portion from MSU’s Institute of International Health, he said.

But Nassiri hopes that as MSU’s medical work in Yucatan continues and generates more data, funding proposals will be approved by agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education, the Gates Foundation and the Kellogg Foundation.

Mexico is one on a long list of countries Nassiri and the IIH have helped in health care capacity building.

At an HIV/AIDS clinic in the Dominican Republic capital of Santo Domingo, for example, the institute was a partner that helped revamp care for the illness, including preventing infant transmissions and stopping patients from contracting diseases related to HIV/AIDS. In the Amazon region of Brazil, the institute is active in tropical-medicine research through a partnership with the country’s Federal University of Para.

But U.S. forms of health care don’t always easily translate abroad, Nassiri said. “I cannot bring American-style capacity building, let us say, to Uganda, because they will not use it.”

O’Horan presented difficulties at first, too, Nassiri said, but hands-on work with doctors at the hospital in Merida showed them how beneficial the outside advice could be.

“At the beginning, they did not understand our culture,” he said, “but now, through many interactions and discussions, they are very efficient with us.”

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