Medical mission brings Marshfield Clinic doctors to Belize

In a part of the world where a trip to the clinic means hours in a bus on bumpy, windy dirt roads, health care works differently than it does in the U.S.

A group from Marshfield Clinic learned what it takes to practice medicine in this setting when they traveled in April to Hillside Health Care Center in Eldridgeville, a city in the Toledo District of the Central American country of Belize.

"It makes you really appreciate what we have here," said Marshfield Center Internal Medicine physician Lori Remeika, M.D.

Dr. Remeika traveled to Belize with a Clinic internal medicine resident and three University of Wisconsin medical students who train at Clinic sites through the Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine (WARM) program.

Practicing practical medicine

The group spent two weeks seeing patients in the three-room clinic and in remote villages where they set up mobile clinics.

Some patients walked in bare feet to the clinic and volunteer medical staff saw patients by the light of a headlamp when darkness fell at the mobile clinics, said Internal Medicine Resident Suma Singh, M.D.

Few lab tests are available, Dr. Remeika said, and procedures like cardiac catheterization aren't available to treat and diagnose clogged arteries.

"You rely on history and physical exam," she said. "It's practical because it has to be."
Dr. Remeika and her colleagues treated patients for back pain brought on by manual labor, headaches, dehydration, skin conditions from living in a humid climate and tropical illnesses like malaria. Other patients came for follow-up care of chronic conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure.

“They were so gracious,” fourth-year medical student Mary Erickson said. “They waited hours for Tylenol but were so grateful we took the time to see them.”

Volunteers aim to improve public health

The group also participated in Hillside’s public health efforts, including talking to community members about dental hygiene, nutrition, healthy aging, disabilities and mental health.

“It was pretty easy to see how cultural, societal and environmental factors contributed to the health of the patients I cared for,” Erickson said. “I hope I will continue to use this lens to look at public health aspects here at home and how those factors influence the health of my future patients.”

Dr. Singh recalled the excitement on the faces of young children who received toothbrushes and learned how to use them. Most people in the U.S. take their toothbrushes for granted, she said, but handing out toothbrushes was an important public health intervention for the children.

Time to take it all in

The trip wasn’t all business, however.

The Clinic crew learned about local culture, tried scuba diving and snorkeling, explored Mayan ruins and became friends with health care students and staff volunteering through the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health and other organizations.

“It’s rewarding to go beyond your comfort zone and see how other people live in the world,” Erickson said.

For more information about Hillside Health Care Center, visit www.hillsidebelize.net.