

**Princeton University Class of 1995 Summer Service Fund  
Child Family Health International Report  
Bolivia 2014**



**Alexandra Ballard**

9/8/14

I first and foremost want to thank the Class of '95 for funding the cost of my plane ticket to enable me to participate in this international internship. Without this support I would not have had one of the most authentic cultural and clinical immersions possible for a pre-med student. I was in Tarija, Bolivia for all of July. I lived with the Marquez family and went to clinical rotations in the mornings and in the afternoons took Spanish classes to improve upon my incoming foundation. The first week I was at El Centro de Salud San Andres, which was a really rural clinic. The doctor said people have to come to this clinic from really far away and they see a wide variety of cases. I quickly learned sanitation concerns in the clinics are much less of a priority than in the U.S,—whether in principle or for financial reasons—since the doctor did not even wear gloves when examining each patient.

The second week I was at La Plataforma de Chagas, which is a clinic/research center that tests and treats patients for Chagas, a disease that is a large problem in many regions in South America. It is like a dark knight because it presents no obvious symptoms, so diagnosis is often missed since it can only be confirmed through blood tests and abnormalities detected through EKGs. Chagas causes serious health problems including a dilated colon and dilated heart. I rotated each day between observing doctors in patient consultations and helping with some lab work. Vectors carrying the parasite *Trypanosoma cruzi* spread the disease and it's a big problem especially in high poverty communities—less educated—that are inadequately informed about the disease and do not know about proper precautions.

The third week I was at El Centro de Salud Nestor Paz. Dra. Delgadillo was one of my favorite doctors I worked with across the two months. She had such a welcoming

personality and was a quixotic example of the stark difference between the majority of the doctors there and back in the U.S. They were all much more down-to-earth and prioritized helping the patients rather than letting frustrations interfere—which I have frequently seen in my shadowing opportunities here. I was also at INTRAID for a day, which is a rehabilitation center that provides a place to stay and/or consultations for people battling drug/alcohol addictions and/or psychological problems. The final week I was at El Centro de Salud Villa Avaroa, an OB/GYN center, so I learned about all the different “anticonceptivo” methods and check-ups for pregnant mothers that include ecographs. I was also at Hospital San Juan de Dios for one day to observe a hysterectomy, which was really interesting. We went on a weekend trip to Potosí where we went on a tour of the mine: Cerro Rico and got to meet with local miners. My time in Tarija was amazing and these clinic interactions and Spanish classes improved my Spanish to make my time in La Paz incredibly rewarding.

I was in La Paz for all of August and spent three weeks shadowing in different departments of Hospital del Niño—nephrology, surgery and oncology. One day in nephrology Dra. Bocangel took us to the burn unit where she had several patients including one poor girl who was burnt from head to toe after being electrocuted outside during a storm. We also were able to go around the neonatal unit where there were many babies struggling to survive with various conditions including a missing thorax, so fluid had built up in his lungs. Surgery was great because they let us stand really close to see everything and there was one really intense lung operation where they had to remove a ton of plaque/tissue build-up that made it incredibly hard for this 9 year old boy to breathe. Oncology was one of the most rewarding and saddest rotations. We watched one morning while this mother basically signed her son’s death certificate. She was refusing

treatment—even though it would have been free—because her new husband did not want any operation and many women there are subservient to males. He had a retinoblastoma that needed to be operated on otherwise it would spread to his other eye and eventually kill him. I had chills as she signed away that they were removing him from the hospital—such a small, innocent, helpless child suffering at the fault of his parents. They were of the local Aymara culture, so it's also possible they did not really believe the doctors or support modern medicine.

My final week I shadowed with Servicio de Adolescentes and Dra. Santivañez taught me how to perform an ecograph and find the placenta and baby's heartbeat, which was amazing. Then later in the week we went to a hospital where a bunch of doctors from different districts came together to learn about the IUD contraceptive and practice insertions. During my time in La Paz, I was also able to travel to the Salar de Uyuni, these incredible salt flats, one weekend and that was one of the most amazingly surreal experiences of my life. My time in the orphanage was challenging because they have so many administrative issues. They would punish the kids a lot, so our time with them was limited, but what we did spend was incredibly endearing and the tough reality they face really struck a cord in my heart. Having the opportunity to expand my medical knowledge in a foreign country and immerse myself in a very different culture has truly matured and enhanced my worldview. I've left with stories, memories of people and a newfound self-confidence that are invaluable and I know will make a huge difference in my med school applications.

Thank you again!





