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UW doctor helping build hospital in Ecuador



Photo courtesy of David Gaus

Wisconsin physician David Gaus visits with a group of indigenous women in the Andes of Ecuador. He's working to get a hospital built in a city near the capital of Quito.

By Aisha Qidwae of the Journal Sentinel

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Nearly 17 years after the birth of Andean Health and Development, the organization is expanding to train Ecuadorean physicians and work toward opening a hospital in Santo Domingo, Ecuador, just west of the capital, Quito.

The Milwaukee native behind the nonprofit organization, physician David Gaus, along with the Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, started a hospital in 2000 in Pedro Vicente Maldonado, a small rural district in the Pichincha province.

Since then, with an initial investment of \$1.5 million, [the 17-bed hospital](#) has become financially sustainable. It took seven years and trial-by-error methods to figure out how patients could afford care when the typical resident's average monthly income is \$150.

The hospital has been able to operate with 70% of payments coming from [Ecuador's Social Security Institute](#) and about 30% from patients. Even after reaching self-sustainability, the hospital still faces challenges in providing health care to its residents.

Compared with other hospitals, small rural hospitals do not function as well because of lack of personnel, less than optimal training and insufficient medical supplies, Gaus said. The medical issues facing the country are similar to what other locations face, including complications of diabetes and hypertension, heart failure, pneumonia, diarrheal disease with severe dehydration, complicated childbirth and kidney infections, among others. In addition, there are medical conditions specific to the region such as snake bites, organophosphate toxicity, typhoid fever, malaria and dengue fever.

The larger, more inclusive hospital planned for Santo Domingo also will be funded by Ecuador's Social Security Institute and patients' out-of-pocket expenses, as well as the municipal government. Construction began a month ago, with the goal of finishing in summer 2013. The city, with a population of 400,000, has a public hospital with just 141 beds.

The new 50-bed hospital also will have a national training center for family physicians, hospital administrators, nurses and a global health research center. Gaus returned to Wisconsin to mobilize resources at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health to help conduct research and fieldwork in medicine, public health, anthropology and nutrition.

"Their perception will help develop treatment strategies that fit for their country, not just transplanted from the U.S., a vastly different culture," he said in an email.

Training physicians

Andean Health and Development, along with the Catholic University in Ecuador, has started training Ecuadorean physicians in family medicine. UW's department of family medicine, where Gaus teaches, and its Global Health Institute will be collaborating with Andean Health and Development to train health care professionals. The ministry of public health is also interested in training 1,000 general physicians in family practice.

"The idea was to recruit physicians from rural areas, to train in rural areas instead of urban areas because urban training doesn't help you with many of the problems that are unique to rural settings," said Gaus, adding that solutions to these problems are different.

He cited examples of people living in rural areas being accustomed to having acute illnesses, where they take antibiotics and think they are cured. Whereas a person living in Quito with diabetes and high blood pressure will understand that several medications manage the conditions.

"The challenge is how to get people to understand chronic diseases and a lifetime

treatment that we believe is necessary from a Western perspective."

Wisconsin similarities

He describes the need to find physicians and nurses dedicated to improving health and medical care in rural areas, similar to the challenges rural Wisconsin faces.

So far, the organization has raised \$2 million over the last 18 months and is aiming to raise \$4 million more. The money has come from generous donors who requested anonymity, Gaus said. Other donors include the Ronald McDonald House Charities and the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation. The Inter-American Development Bank is lending the organization \$800,000 to help complete the construction.

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