Rare gift leads to CU/Guatemala health collaboration

The heat was stifling, lying like a wet blanket over the village of El Pomal in southwest Guatemala. This past June, a CU School of Medicine team sweated through their pale blue scrubs as a line of children snaked around the concrete schoolhouse. “We have seen 12 children so far. Nine had diarrhea for more than two weeks, and about two-thirds have parasites,” said Edwin Asturias, MD, director for Latin America at the Center for Global Health, part of the Colorado School of Public Health. “What we are seeing is a chronic cycle of poverty.”

The team was here to assess the health needs of the population and lay the groundwork for CU’s first permanent medical presence in a developing country. The project was spurred by $1 million from the Jose Fernando Bolaños Foundation to build a clinic, research lab, housing complex, and conference center on 10 acres near a Guatemala banana plantation owned by the Bolaños family. CU Denver College of Architecture and Planning students designed the first rendering of the facility and may help in its construction.

The gift represents a rare partnership between a Guatemalan company and a U.S. public university. The company has sponsored past university health programs in the country, but this is its biggest, most far-reaching gift yet. The goal is to improve the health of the more than 3,000 plantation workers and nearly 24,000 people in the surrounding villages. Asturias expects CU medical faculty and students to begin rotating through Guatemala starting in 2013.

“As businessmen, we wanted a world-class organization with world-class resources to help us,” said Fernando Bolaños, CEO of plantation owner AgroAmérica. “We are making a huge, formal commitment. I have known Edwin Asturias for years and I consider him one of the top public health doctors in the world. We are proud that he is Guatemalan and has such an incredible social conscience.”

Gustavo Bolaños, chief operating officer for AgroAmérica, said Guatemala is a nation of extremes with a layer of very wealthy people atop millions of very poor. His father, Don Jose Fernando Bolaños, was orphaned at age 13 and rose to build one of the biggest banana-producing firms on earth. Yet he never lost sight of his moral obligations.

The company started a program to empower women and built a private elementary school for the workers’ children. Yet their motives are not solely altruistic. “We want our workers to stay, and that means they need to be healthy,” said Gustavo Bolaños. “God has given us all many talents. The more he gives you, the more you have to give back.”
Though southwest Guatemala may seem like a tropical paradise, lush and studded with papaya and coconut trees, it is poor and basic hygiene is lacking. Residents often share dirt-floor homes with livestock. Regular flooding causes toilets to overflow, contaminating drinking water. Doctors are few, hospitals fewer.

Asturias was joined by CU medical students Lauren Mehner, Darren Eblovi, and pediatrician James Gaensbauer, MD, a Children’s Hospital infectious disease fellow. A major goal of the visit was collecting blood and stool samples to better understand the local parasite and anemia problem.

“We have found that of children here between the ages of 3 and 7, 60 percent have anemia,” said Eblovi. “If you have anemia very young, your IQ and development is much lower.”

Every night, the specimens were taken back for testing to Asturias’ family home on a coffee plantation in the cool highlands, an hour from the sultry villages below. One slide revealed four kinds of parasites. “[Parasites] are a manifestation of poverty,” said Gaensbauer.

The work was exhausting but intensely rewarding. Mehner said she hopes to eventually design aid programs around the world. “I’d love to cure cancer, but I’d also like to eradicate the things we can cure now, like diarrhea,” she said. “This has made my passion stronger. Being out there every day in the heat and meeting these families helps you connect with them on a deeper level. You feel like you are part of something big, important, and permanent.”

The next morning, the team was doing physicals at a school when a child was hustled toward them, bleeding from the head. Asturias laid him on a table. Children watched as he sewed up the gash, nimbly assisted by Mehner, who soothed the sobbing 8-year-old. Twelve stitches later, it was over. The boy’s mother, a weary-looking woman with deep lines on her face, cautiously approached.

“How much do I owe you?” she asked quietly.

Asturias wiped the sweat from his face and smiled.

“Absolutely nothing,” he said.

“A more comprehensive version of this story, with photo slideshow, can be viewed at http://bit.ly/QdLUmb.

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—LAUREN MEHNER, CU MEDICAL STUDENT