

May 2004

International Health Elective in the Dominican Republic

For my fourth year international health elective I went to the Dominican Republic in April 2004 and had a wonderful time. It is a beautiful country, the people are very nice, and it is pretty safe as long as you are street smart. The contact person to set this up is Dr. Douglas Van Auken at Metrohealth—his email address is dvanauken@metrohealth.org, or you can get his office phone number from the Metrohealth web site by searching his name. He is involved with a clinic in Guaricano, an indigent area about a 20 min drive (or 1 hour walk + bus ride) from Santo Domingo. The clinic is called Fedopo, which stands for **F**ederacion **D**ominicana de **O**rganizaciones **P**opulares. It was founded around 1990 and serves as a health clinic and community center for the surrounding area. Dr. Van Auken is a wonderful doctor who has spent a great deal of his own time and money to get this clinic off its feet and running. He usually spends about one month per year in the Dominican Republic visiting and helping the clinic. He is eager to get medical students involved with this clinic as it is a great way to learn about the structure and activities of clinics that help underserved populations. First year medical students can probably go as well during the summer after first year.

Another person to contact when setting this up is Glen Odenbrett at gxo2@cwru.edu. He is the director of the Community Services Office at Case and he's setting up a coordinated effort to send undergrads and medical students to the clinic.

Your experience in the Dominican Republic will depend on your Spanish proficiency. I recommend that you have at least a basic knowledge of Spanish before going. When I went I stayed in Santo Domingo and went to Spanish school in the mornings for 3 weeks. I attended Hispaniola Language School and recommend it highly; they can also arrange a home stay for you in Santo Domingo. In the afternoons I spent time in various clinics and hospitals in Santo Domingo with which Dr. Van Auken has contacts. Some afternoons were spent at Fedopo as well as part of the 4th week that I was there. Most of my clinic experience was just observing, which was fine with me since I was not fluent in Spanish. I learned a lot about medicine in the Dominican Republic as well as the Fedopo clinic and how it operates.

If you have more than a month to spend in the Dominican Republic, I would recommend going to Spanish school only for 2-3 weeks, then having your clinic experience after that. This way you can avoid shuttling between school and the clinics, which can be difficult at times (especially for Fedopo). I'm not sure of a place to stay that is closer to Fedopo, but Glen may be able to help you out with that.

Or if your Spanish is already pretty good, you can just have a clinic experience at Fedopo and/or other places. In this case you may be able to see patients at Fedopo once in a while instead of simply observing. The Spanish school can arrange housing for you even if you don't take classes, although again this would be in Santo Domingo, about an hour walk + bus ride from Fedopo.

When you go to the Dominican Republic you can bring a suitcase full of medical supplies for the Fedopo clinic. You can get the supplies from Medwish Cleveland (formerly Intervol, www.intervolcleveland.org), a charity that collects and donates medical supplies to developing countries. Dr. Van Auken can give you a list of supplies that would be the most helpful. The people at Fedopo really needed the supplies and were extremely appreciative!

I hope this summary is helpful. It really was a great experience, and my Spanish improved a lot while I was there. I will still be using my email account after graduation, so feel free to contact me at christina.nelson@cwru.edu with any questions.

Sincerely,

Christina Nelson