

## **Medical Mission Report: January 2024 and the Difficult Journey to Lambayeque, Peru!**

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Our team of approximately 50 volunteers begins the preparations for our next surgical mission trip the week after we return home from the current mission. Surgeons, anesthesiologists, RNs, surgical techs, speech pathologist, interpreters and FACES administration. It takes A LOT of planning and preparation to make this important work happen. Each of us make many sacrifices and donations of time and money throughout the year to buy supplies and equipment etc. We also help the families traveling to Lambayeque with expenses through fundraising.

I have worked with this group for the past 3 years and this year I served as team lead for the eight PACU nurses. This meant I was involved in the selection process as well as the training and extensive planning. It is challenging introducing this many nurses to each other in a new work environment. There were groups of 2 and 3 nurses that do work together in their home hospitals and we did try to accommodate their desire to work together for several shifts. We represented 5 hospitals from the Portland, Oregon area.

Our packing party/orientation was scheduled for January 13<sup>th</sup>. This is where everyone brings a large extra suitcase to pack with all of the medical supplies we have to check through to Peru. It's a great event where we organize and shuffle. Introductions are made and the team starts to come together. This was not to be this year! Portland had a huge ice storm and unfortunately, we had to cancel our group packing party. Team leads scrambled and we were able to have anyone that could crawl along the icy roads come by to the packing location 2 days later help us out. Success! We were ready to depart for Peru in 4 days.

Most of us schedule our flights to arrive in Lima at the same time. This is because the Customs agents are very thorough when going through our medical equipment. Not everyone on the team speaks Spanish and so we need strong Spanish speakers to be available as we go through this process. Just 2 days prior to our trip, Alaska airlines cancelled (not replaced) our flights from Portland to Los Angeles! This was because of the incident that happened that week where the plane door panel flew off mid-air. All Boeing 737-9 Max planes were grounded. All of us shuffled and waited on hold for many hours trying to reschedule our flight to Los Angeles to catch the LATAM flight from Las Angeles to Lima. Many flights were cancelled as well related to the continued icy weather. Flights were difficult to find. In the end we all made it but it was a very stressful and exhausting time.

After traveling for 40 hours, we arrive in Lambayeque at 11 pm and check into our very simple, non-air-conditioned hotel. The air is humid and hot but we are thankful to have a place to rest.

Our work begins early the next day. We will spend the next 6 days working very hard and with minimal equipment but many of us return year after year. We unload all of the suitcases with our equipment and we set up makeshift stations in the hospital. Our Peruvian friends recognize when we come and are friendly and helpful as we work. This is a partnership as we learn from them more about their culture and how to best help our patients and their families in this stressful time. They love to practice English with us and we love to practice our Spanish with them. The residents, surgeons and nurses love to observe our techniques and practices. Basic speech pathology techniques for cleft lip and palate patients are taught to students at the local university who are interested in helping with continued care of our patients. I love this special give and take relationship we share. The families are arriving for final screenings and they are delighted to see our nametags and greet us with smiles. There are also many

families that show up without our knowledge and kindly ask if we can help their child. We do our best to get a screening done and put them on a list for our services. Perhaps there will be a no show or cancellation due to illness. But sadly, some will have to wait until our next campaign.

Five long, hard days begin. We walk the ½ mile to the hospital through the quaint town. The parks are loved by the people and are beautiful and clean. The bougainvillea is in full bloom everywhere and the vibrant colors give us morning energy and strength for our extended work day. The freshly painted yellow church is already bustling with early morning worshipers. We proudly wear our name tags. Nurses are not allowed to wear scrubs outside of the hospital and are expected to wear professional attire past the guards and into the locked gates before changing into our personal scrubs in the less than clean surgical changing rooms.

We set up the one portable suction machine we have and check the one tank of oxygen we are provided for our four PACU bays. Our preop teaching with interpreters and families begins. Our own preop assessment is done. Our eyes are the first on the patient for the day and with our combined years of experience in the perioperative setting we are highly attuned to potential complications. We bring up any concerns to the anesthesiologists and surgeons. Linen in the hospital is scarce and threadbare. We gift each child a small quilt that will follow the patient throughout their stay. This will be laid on the OR table, the PACU bed and then will accompany the pt to the stifling hot pediatric in-patient unit where the child and one adult will spend the night. Surgery usually goes smoothly with our own sets of instruments, but the unfamiliar anesthesia machines can be a challenge for our anesthesiologists. We are constantly using creativity to provide safe care for the patients. PACU stays went well this year and we provided the usual airway management, bleeding control and post op nausea and vomiting prevention and treatment. Besides the physical care of the patient, there is post op teaching with our interpreters and comfort and emotional care to both patient and their parents. This is simply the best time of the whole day. Seeing the joy and relief on the face of the parents melts away the fatigue and weariness we may be feeling during our work day at Hospital Belen.

The child will have a crib or bed to rest and recover. The parent will sit by their child in a worn plastic patio chair, gently fanning their child with a hand fan that we have gifted them. We also send syringes with premeasured ibuprofen and acetaminophen for them to administer through the next 24-72 hours. No narcotics are available after the patient leaves our PACU. The hospital does not allow this. We also send apple juice and water that we purchase with a syringe to keep the patient hydrated. Nurses on the pediatric floor are not allowed to run IV fluids on our patients.

We work through providing care for 6-9 patients each day. There are some complicated clefts that are long overdue for surgery. Many times, there are 2-3 surgeons working at a time in the ORs. They are skilled and their work is amazing. Our anesthesia team provide care that can only be described as remarkable. They are teammates until the bitter end every evening. They walk out the doors with us every night.

The local Lions philanthropic group provide a nutritious and delicious box lunch for us each day. They proudly wear their yellow and purple vests as they serve us in the outdoor courtyard. The local fruits are something I look forward to each year. After we finish our meals and are ready to return to patient care, we are given a kiss on each cheek from these lovely ladies. They also generously bring homemade soup to the parents staying in the in-patient unit with their child. Such care and teamwork make our campaign run smoothly.

We wearily head home from the hospital between 7 to 11 pm. Maybe we grab a piece of cold pizza that our surgeons have had delivered to the closet size break room we share with our Peruvian friends. We have to walk out through the emergency room since the front gates are locked for the night. We weave through the critically ill patients, occasionally stopping to pet the resident kittens that roam the halls of

the hospital. I share the leftovers of my lunch with the skinny little felines and by the end of the week they are watching for me at the end of each evening. We walk back to the hotel through the lively streets where the children and teens blast their music and line dance in the street. The residents house dogs are on the roof of the home. They make it known that we are strangers. Street dogs await a scrap or two from the local chicken and potato café. The evening worshipers are still lined up at the yellow church. We are acknowledged with many “Gracias por ayudar a los niños.” “Thank you for helping our children!” Back at the hotel, we purchase the largest bottle of cold water that we can find. An immediate shower is calling our names. We hope that the water is flowing and not barely trickling as it sometimes does when too many people are showering. We try to find the sweet spot in our hotel rooms where we can find a phone signal to message our families at home that we are safe and well.

Our alarms are set for the next morning. We eat a quick continental breakfast at the hotel and then rush off to meet the surgeons at the hospital to do postop visits on the patients that were surgically treated the previous day. Some will need further IV hydration from our team prior to discharge. Some will need wound care and further teaching prior to starting their arduous journey home. After postop visits are complete, our team is split up into groups and the day repeats itself.

On Friday we finish surgeries, inventory and pack up all of our supplies. They will be stored in a local Lion members attic. Our time in Lambayeque for the year 2024 is finished. We prepare baskets of treats, pens and the beloved colored sticky notes. We deliver the baskets with a sincere thank you for our OR/PACU nurse friends as well as the wonderful in-patient nurses who provide post op care for our patients. After our 6 days of work is complete, we meet at a local restaurant to celebrate with our health care provider friends and the Lion members who support us. We eat and we dance to celebrate the lives that we have worked together to improve.

Every day has different problems and every day has different blessings while we are there. The beautiful children and lovely people of Peru will always hold a special place in my heart. We certainly gain as much as we give. My bucket is filled as I return to care for the children in my home hospital. Physically tired but emotionally and spiritually renewed as to why I chose to become a PACU nurse.





