

I set off for Mexico knowing nothing about what to expect. The idea behind going abroad to gain some medical work experience was one I made after shadowing various doctors in NHS hospitals and clinics in England. I realised that, although this gave me a good insight into the NHS system and taught me a lot about the science behind the various specialities whose wards I worked in, I never really got to grips with what it was actually like to treat patients and be actively involved with the patient care – seeing it be done was not enough to decide that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life! In England, and especially in the NHS, it's very hard to do anything apart from observe in a healthcare setting without official qualifications and checks so I realised I'd have to go elsewhere to really get stuck in, and see if I enjoyed the work of such a profession, before I applying to Medical School this October.

I found lots of different 'pre-medical' projects that all offered this sort of thing, and I chose one called Global Medical Projects – really because it was the cheapest (it was unbelievable how expensive most of them were!) - but also because it was the only one which offered placements in Mexico, somewhere that I've always really wanted to go. Mexico is a developing country but it has a very varied economy throughout with some very rich areas, mostly populated with people who've come over from Canada and the States, and other extremely poor areas. And the city we were living in had this same distribution but very closely packed together – one minute being scared to walk down the street with your iPhone in your pocket, and then crossing the road and being on the wealthiest street in Guadalajara. This made it an exciting and interesting place to be, with no part of the city being boring or predictable.

So myself and George Hammond, another Marlburian who also wants to study medicine, arrived in Guadalajara and were met by Ariel, our project manager. He took us to the house we were living in – a very simple house in one of the poorer areas of the city - owned by a very welcoming family who unfortunately didn't speak any English! George and I having gone out with no Spanish (what with A Levels, we couldn't



really commit much time to learning it before we went) were a bit nervous about trying to communicate with them the coming month... The family consisted of a couple with three children, a little grandchild, and a cousin. Salvando, the dad, was a real character and we got on really well with him. He seemed not to be able to *spea*k English, but still knew the words of every Beatles song in English which gave us some basis of communication!



We'd arrived on a Friday, so Ariel left us to our own devices over the weekend and planned to meet us at the hospital on Monday morning and introduce us to the doctors. We



settled in and explored the city, going to the San Juan De Dios market on Sunday and eating lots of Mexican delicacies (everything was very cheap out there...). Our family were really sweet to us, inviting us Salsa dancing in the square outside the Expiatorio Church, and we all attempted a little sign language to try and get to know each other better!





On Tuesday, we started in the hospital. Again, it was a bit of a shock for George and me because the doctors and med students at the hospital spoke very little English, and not really enough to teach us about what they were doing or tell us what we could do to help. So the first couple of days at the hospital were really tricky, trying to get involved with as much as we could in the A&E department while trying to pick up Spanish as quickly as possible! *Luckily*, on our fourth day at the hospital we met this lovely medical student called Isabel. She really saved us! She spoke extremely good English (almost to the point where one wouldn't guess it wasn't her first language), which she'd picked up just from watching American TV shows – no lessons! She completely took us under her wing for the time we were there, and taught us so much.

In Mexico there's basically three levels of healthcare: 1. The private healthcare, for the minority (20% of Mexicans) who can afford it, 2. The healthcare which requires a tiny bit of insurance to be paid (40% of Mexicans have this), and 3. The Green Cross healthcare, which is completely free and funded by the government, so is mainly for the people without jobs or homes who can't afford to pay insurance. We were working



for a Green Cross hospital so there was a lot about the healthcare, and about the patients, that shocked us. For example, 30% of people in Mexico have Metabolic Syndrome - which is basically caused by lack of exercise and bad diet, and which commonly leads to diabetes, risk of stroke and heart disease - so the amount of overweight people with heart problems that came in was unbelievable. This made me really think about food and drink prices in Mexico, and the next time I was in a supermarket I checked out that buying a bottle of Coca-Cola was actually cheaper than a bottle of water! (Coke was 9 pesos, and water about 12; 22 pesos is £1) And a plate of tacos (20 pesos) is a much cheaper option than a salad (40 pesos) when you're eating out. What confirmed that eating unhealthy food just is the cheaper and easier option for people who aren't well-off was when George and I spotted a woman outside the hospital feeding her baby Coca-Cola from a milk bottle...eek.



Due to the A&E department not being as busy as we'd hoped, we opted to work there for some night shifts when it was busier, and in the days we'd sit in on consultations in different departments, with Isabel translating for us. We mainly sat in on gynaecology and cardiology consultations because the doctors there were happy for us to shadow. The cardiologist doctor spoke good English, and *loved* to teach, so we learnt so much from him. The gynaecologist didn't speak as much English, but it was all quite self-explanatory; and he was able to show George and me how to carry out a cervical examination, and take a smear test, which we were both allowed to do ourselves! What I found shocking about that was that the women weren't really told who we were/that we weren't medical students, and it luckily went fine, but I felt a bit sorry for them not being in the know while we were carrying out quite an intimate examination! In England we would *never* be allowed to do that!



When we did spend time in the A&E department, which was if we'd finished cardiology consultations early, or on night shifts that we'd opted to do, we were basically acting as healthcare assistants: taking blood pressures (in this hospital they



didn't have the easy electric ones!), feeding patients, taking them to the bathroom, helping them move around in bed, sitting them up so they could take their medication etc. It's amazing because I've just got a job as a care worker here in London, which involves exactly all those things I was doing in Mexico, but here I needed to get different certificates (CPR and Manual Handling), training days, CRB/DBS checks, bloods tests and vaccinations before I could start work! So I'm really glad I spent the time I did doing the same kind of things, because I feel much more confident and experienced now with this job than I would have before. It's also funny because you can't really get a job in England in healthcare without some active experience, but you can't get any active experience because you're not allowed or qualified to get involved! So going to Mexico and being able to get all that experience really helped me to get this job, and I wouldn't have had a shot without it.

Our night shifts were really great because we got to see a lot more in A&E than in the day. There was one funny night on Mexican Independence Day when we went straight from a big party in the main square to a night shift at the hospital, knowing there'd be loads of patients coming in that night! We saw someone come in with a stab wound on their



bottom 4 inches deep that night – the stitching took a long time and we stayed there until about 4am! Isabel also took us on some night shifts at a different hospital (also Green Cross) in another part of town which had a really busy A&E department.



George and I befriended this lovely young couple, Santiago and Sofia, living in Guadalajara and they showed us round the city, taking us to restaurants, markets, and also taking us away one weekend to Lake Chapala. Lake Chapala is Mexico's largest fresh-water lake, and is about an hour from Guadalajara. We stayed with Santiago's family who live there and had the best time. We'd been having quite busy days in the city, and our time by the lake completely relaxed us: they say that Lake Chapala releases this kind of scent from the sulphur that acts as a sedative and relaxes everyone who breathes in the air! Maybe it was just a myth but we all said it worked! There were huge, dramatic storms at night while we were staying there, and then perfect



warm days: they also say that the area around Lake Chapala has the best climate in the world. It was a really beautiful place with mountains surrounding the lake, and there was a town about 5 minutes away called Ajijic which was a really cool place right by the lake, with colourful streets and loads of markets. As you can tell I really rated this place, and definitely recommend visiting if ever anyone is going to Mexico!



George and I both agreed that we wouldn't have wanted to go anywhere else but Mexico if we could re-plan our trip. The difficulties at the hospital, what with not many people who we could communicate with and being placed in the A&E ward where there wasn't much to do, made us try so hard to be

busy and learning all the time. I suppose we were much more proactive because of this, and found other areas where we could help out and shadow, which we probably would have missed out on had we been handed everything on a plate: cardiology, for example, was not a department we'd been 'assigned' to by Global Medical Projects, but by befriending Isabel and the cardiologist we learnt so much about this specialty, and it's something I'm now



really inspired to learn more about as it interested me so much.

This trip proved to give us such a fascinating and challenging time, which has managed to inspire and motivate me even more to follow the course of medicine. It's taught me that medicine is such an ever-changing and developing subject, and so varied across different parts of the world, as the equipment, system, and approach to patients were all so different in this hospital in Mexico than in what I've seen in England. I'm so grateful for the money I was given to allow me to pay for this trip, as it was such an adventure and really taught me a great deal.

