

Medical Student Enrichment Program

University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine

Clinical Elective: Choma, Zambia – Macha Mission Hospital

Dates of Training: January 28, 2019 to February 24, 2019

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“We can’t do that here.”

I quickly grew frustrated by that phrase while rotating at Macha Mission Hospital in southern Zambia. In medical school, I spent countless hours listening to lectures, reading books, and taking tests to learn how to treat patients. Now all of that training felt useless in a setting with no electrolytes, EKGs, CT scans, or endoscopy.

All we had was a strained history from the patient, our physical exam, and a pharmacy with a limited supply of basic medicines. I found it difficult to diagnose and treat with any level of confidence. How could I be sure in my impression with such little objective evidence? How could I treat effectively without a full set of therapeutic options? I felt helpless. I felt buried under the thought that I may fail these patients.



But that feeling did not continue for the whole trip. In a matter of weeks, I grew to appreciate a side of medicine that I had yet to experience thus far in my training. I saw the side of medicine



that is more human than it is statistics and outcomes. I was able to explore the most basic role of a physician in the lives of patients, families, and communities. Those of us lucky enough to become medical providers truly have an incredible privilege to help patients achieve their goals through life changing interventions. We have the opportunity to come alongside our patients and help them make decisions that impact their futures and, subsequently, the lives of their loved ones. Because of our intervention, no matter how simple, patients get the chance to continue living fulfilling and

meaningful lives despite their disease. While in Macha, I experienced firsthand the privilege and responsibility that comes with the role of a healthcare provider.

One of my most vivid memories from this time in Zambia was caring for a young man with rheumatic heart disease. He developed the disease as a child and was now living day to day with symptoms of heart and liver failure before reaching the age of twenty. The day we met, he had come to the hospital to have fluid drawn out of his abdomen. This has to occur every two weeks to improve his breathing. As a student from America, my initial thought was, “How could this happen? How could we have stopped this? How can we cure him?” Unfortunately, the resources available to him made valve replacement or transplant impossible. While my questions are valid on a larger, global scale, these questions would remain unanswered for this young man. That truth sat in my stomach like a brick. I wanted to shut down. I felt as though we, as a healthcare system, had all failed him. But, I was missing the point. I was too fixated on the greater system that I failed to understand the patient’s perspective. He had been dealing with this for years. He had come to terms with his circumstances. Now, he needed someone to help him work towards his personal goals and priorities within the resources available to him. His goal at this point was to breathe easily for another two weeks so that he could enjoy life with his family and friends! The role I was able to play in the care of this patient was a great privilege. While the discussion of why we couldn’t do more for this patient may be valid on a larger scale, I was forced to recognize my role to impact my patient - the privilege I had to intervene at all. Furthermore, I was forced to recognize how greatly this impacted my own development as a healthcare provider.



I have been working long hours to understand the delivery of healthcare in the United States. Many hours have been spent analyzing diseases, treatments, and outcomes. I know it is possible to be crushed under all of the data. So much of my time in medical school was spent learning numbers, figures, and charts that I had forgotten my role in the lives of my patients. One month in Zambia gave me valuable perspective regarding the privilege I have to do this job. It may be challenging or frustrating at times, but it is still incredibly rewarding to have the opportunity to intervene.

John Snellgrove