

Medical Student Enrichment Program

University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine

Clinical Elective: Mutengene, Cameroon - Baptist Hospital Mutengene

Dates of Training: January 29, 2018 to February 25, 2018

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I returned from Cameroon just before the week my wife's 3rd grade students began studying Africa. It was the perfect opportunity to talk about my experience over the past month. I collected all the clothes, currency and souvenirs I brought back and prepared a presentation with the photos I had taken for the class. The kids loved seeing the pictures and trying on the shirts, but they were most excited about the money I brought back. I passed around bills worth 500, 1000 and 10,000 Central African Francs and had everyone guess how much they thought the 500 CFA bill was worth. "A million dollars!" one boy shouted from the back. The other answers weren't as outrageous, but still ranged from fifty to several hundred dollars. When I told them the bill was worth one U.S. dollar, the excitement faded drastically. "You can't buy anything with that," the same boy said. I was amazed that something they thought was so valuable just a minute before, could become so uninteresting in no time. Even after I explained that, with that 500 CFA bill, I could have bought a full meal, paid for my cell phone airtime for two weeks, or caught a taxi to the adjacent town and back, the bill's worth still didn't return much. Their perspective of the value of a single dollar was too engrained for them to see how much more it meant to the people in Cameroon. This wasn't the first occasion that made me realize how important perspective was, but it was the one that bothered me most.



After we finished the first surgical case I scrubbed into, I found myself following the routine I always did at home. Remove my gown, get the stretcher, find the roller board to move the patient over...but that's where I got stuck. I looked everywhere, but I couldn't find anything to help us move the patient after her cesarean section. I hesitantly walked back to the bedside and waited to see if maybe I had just missed it in the room. "Grab my hands," the scrub tech instructed me, as he reached under the patient from across the stretcher. As he strained to extend his arms beneath the patient, the CRNA started to pick up the shoulders and the

circulator positioned herself at the foot of the bed. They all looked towards me, the only person not sure what we were doing. “We’re...lifting her?” I asked. They all nodded and we proceeded to pick the patient up and move her over to the stretcher. Afterwards, I asked the tech if he’d ever seen anything that made moving patients easier. He told me “No, in Africa, we use manpower!” He almost seemed proud to say it.

Over the next few days, I spent my spare time exploring the hospital campus looking for materials I could use to create a roller board similar to what we used back home. Once I had found everything, I brought it to the on-site carpentry workshop and tried to explain my idea. The first prototype was hard to describe, but after a full morning of woodworking, my roller board took a shape that started to make some sense. Initially, the woodworkers were skeptical that my board would work, but after I had the cover sewed and showed them how it worked, they were convinced. Over the next few days, they took my instructional drawings and made two additional devices that looked and functioned way better than my original design. All it took to turn their thoughts on the idea was a brief demonstration.

I brought the newly constructed roller boards to the OR once they were completed. Again, the staff looked at me strangely when I told them this board covered in the OR table material would mean they don’t have to lift up any more patients, but it only took one transfer to convince them. After giving a presentation at the weekly staff meeting, then supervising the staff as they used the board for the first couple of times, everyone was behind the idea. I didn’t see another patient have to be picked up, and I didn’t hear of another hurt back for the rest of the time I was there.

These were just a few of the times that showed me how much a person’s perspective can shape how they see the world, both positively and negatively. It also made me realize how easily perspectives can change, as long as you’re open to trying new things or listening to others. Through this experience, my perspective has absolutely been shaped. Before I left for Cameroon, I had heard the term “global service learning,” but I really wasn’t sure what it meant. I definitely knew I would be helping people in a resource-poor environment, but I didn’t have a clue how much I would bring back from a place that many people think has so little. I have so much respect for all the providers I worked with during my month, because they truly make so much out of the things they’ve been given, and from any perspective, are incredible individuals.

W. Logan Riley