

**Medical Student Enrichment Program**

University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine

**Clinical Elective:** Baní, Dominican Republic – INTEC: Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo

**Dates of Training:** June 2, 2024 – June 30, 2024

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**Date of Reflection:** July 12, 2024

English, Spanish, Creole. Three languages, and the only one I spoke fluently was practically useless at the clinic where I worked in rural Bani. I knew the language barrier would be a challenge during this experience for me. What I didn't know was how many patients experience the same challenge when trying to access routine healthcare. We would often see patients who spoke Creole, and they would have to come in with friends who could translate for them. One patient was pregnant, and she came in a few times with her friend for regular visits. Then one day, she came alone. Physical examination revealed signs of infection that could put her baby at risk and that meant her partner was also affected. The day she returned for a pap smear, she was alone again. She laid back on the exam table, and I wondered how she felt; surrounded by people, but all alone, as everything was in a language she could not understand.

I found myself feeling this way many times while in the Dominican Republic. Patients came in unable to speak Spanish, and varying degrees of effort were put into trying to communicate with them. Some doctors did better than others at slowing down, or using Google translate, and trying to make sure the patient had some idea of what was going on. It was difficult to sit there and know there was so little I could do to help when I could hardly even communicate with the doctors.

This language barrier prevented me from comforting any patient in the ways I would usually try to. At the pediatric hospital in Santo Domingo, a mother sat with her infant afflicted with Moebius syndrome as a result of her attempted abortion. When I went in to check on the child, I saw the mother as well, a million thoughts written on her face. I wanted to talk to her, to see if it would bring her any relief to share just one of those thoughts, but the only words I could find were, "estás bien?" I gave her a small smile in the hopes that it would somehow convey all the things I wished I could say.

However, I don't think the language barrier was the only thing stopping me from speaking. My Spanish is limited, but I could certainly have managed more than that. The truth is, I didn't know what to say. What do you tell someone who is grieving the ailment of their child as well as their own role in it? I'm not sure I could have found the words in any language. As it turns out, the language of compassion is universal, and being faced with such difficult situations revealed that I am not yet fluent in it.

Eventually, the pregnant patient in Bani returned for her medications. She sat in a chair against the wall while the doctor, the students and I stood across from her, discussing her treatment in

Spanish. I watched as she sat alone, looking from person to person, attempting to follow the conversation. Finally, I decided to do something; I pulled up a chair and sat next to her. I don't think she even noticed, her eyes fixed on the conversation unfolding in front of her. Finally, the doctor started asking questions and giving instructions about her medications. When the patient couldn't understand the questions, the doctor tried repeating them in a simpler way, eventually asking the students how she could rephrase. While that happened, I tapped on the patient's shoulder. I had pulled up Creole in Google translate, and I asked her if she understood Spanish very well. She took a moment to read my (certainly incorrect) Creole and laughed; that was the first time I saw her smile since she'd arrived at the clinic. She shook her head no, and I entered my response into Google translate again: *mwen menm* (me neither).

I don't know if my being there and attempting to speak her language helped her in any way. What I do know is that this experience was the first time I felt isolation due to a language barrier myself. There were many times when I was in a room full of people, but I felt alone because I couldn't understand a word that was being said. While this can apply to languages like Spanish, English, and Creole, it can also apply to medical terminology. Oftentimes, patients have very little understanding of what is happening in a medical setting. During moments like this, it is so important that, as healthcare workers, we take a moment to slow down and remember that these patients are going through the most difficult times of their lives. This clinical experience has been invaluable for me; it will serve as a reminder to always treat patients with compassion and to do my best to ensure they never feel alone.

