

HOPING FOR HEALTH IN HONDURAS

by Ann Gerhardt, MD *Subscribe at*

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At least there was only one chicken on the bus. And it was in a box and didn't make much noise. Almost everyone, including chickens, use buses to get around in Honduras. Unless there is a cab to share with as many people as the cabby can pack into it. Or a pick-up truck to jump into, rap on the back window to get off and pay the driver a quickly negotiated fee.

The ancient school bus, with high-backed, rock-hard seats and empty soda containers rolling between our feet, did its little-engine-that-could trek up the winding mountain road to La Esperanza. La Esperanza, meaning 'the hope,' is where my friend Ann works for the Peace Corps and where she would connect me with World Vision. A World Vision supervisor would drive us into the hills, where the people are poorer than poor, carry all their water from dirty streams and live in empty stone and mud huts with dirt floors.

There I would see patients who had washed up just for the occasion of seeing the 'gringa' doctor from the U.S. They had dressed in the better of their two outfits of clothing. The children would withdraw into their mother's skirts, giggling and whispering. They would not question the wisdom of climbing on a cold hard desk (the 'exam' table) for me to poke on their belly and ask them to stick out their tongues.

I had been told that I would see children with 'gastritis,' which is extremely common in Central America. I took medicines for gastritis, diarrhea, nausea and pain, knowing that there would not only be no facilities to do testing, but also no money for treatment.

The variety of disease I actually saw was astounding, far from simple gastritis. From three siblings with a very rare genetic disease of sugar metabolism, to a little boy with a loud heart murmur and weakness, each patient presented a new surprise. The 20 year old woman who should have been admitted to the hospital months ago shocked me: Her brothers had no money for treatment of her pernicious vomiting, nearly obtunded mental state, swollen belly and leg sores. World Vision would arrange and pay for her admission to the hospital, but would not happen for weeks.

There is hope in La Esperanza. These people hung on my every broken-Spanish word (my U.S. patients know better). Parents tried to hide crest-fallen faces when I suggested they feed their children protein foods far less affordable than tortillas, rice and potatoes. They didn't question my advice. Such is the faith in foreign medicine that two add-on, adult patients saw me just to confirm the wisdom of their Honduran doctors' advice (which, by the way, seemed to be sound).

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HEALTHY CHOICES FOR MIND AND BODY

Written by Ann Gerhardt, MD

World Vision in La Esperanza focuses on children's health, water sanitation and disease prevention. Ann had spent two years with them, teaching AIDS prevention, safe sex, and biology. Her roommate, Marianne, works with them to convince people to chlorinate their water. Yuki, a young man from Japan, tries to rid the area of a parasite that causes the severe Chagas heart disease.

I gave a stethoscope to their nurse and tried to teach her to examine an abdomen, attempting to leave behind something that might enable her to care for these children. They asked me to return.