

Med student to spend Reading Week volunteering in Ecuador

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News Staff

Flying south for Reading Week may be high on the minds of many students braving the freezing weather while on their way to class, but for Andy Wensel, a balmy climate isn't the reason for her upcoming trip across the equator.

For the next week, Wensel will be in Ecuador as a translator, helping orthopedic surgeons perform much-needed surgery on those that can't afford it.

Now in her second year of medicine at the University of Alberta, Wensel is making her fourth visit to the South American country as a volunteer translator for the Edmonton-based Canadian Association of Medical Teams Abroad (CAMTA), where she acts as the organization's main link to its patients.

"You get to know people on a totally different level," she says. "[When] travelling normally, you don't meet people in this way. You don't get such insight into their lives."

Wensel helps CAMTA perform procedures that seem routine by Canadian standards. However, what CAMTA does in Ecuador is far from routine—for the two weeks they're in Quito, Ecuador's capital, she and her peers perform surgery for free.

Many patients are too poor to pay for operations, meaning that they would otherwise suffer without. Wensel says that this has given her a close-up look at how unequal health care can be in poor countries. In fact, Wensel's team is set up in a hospital located in one of the poorest parts of Quito.

"You're at least aware of the discrepancy, but not letting the guilt overcome you, that was a hard thing to get past because the inequality is immense."

To illustrate the disparity between Canada and Ecuador, Wensel uses the procedure of fixing club foot on children, a birth defect where their feet are pointed down and inward. Fixing it using casting therapy is a routine procedure in Canada—but money keeps many Ecuadorians from getting

it done.

"[In Canada], we fix it at birth. But there, it gets to the point where they need significant surgery because they've grown with it and haven't had it treated before," she says, explaining that it often means cutting ligaments to move the feet to their proper position.

Still, Wensel explains, many of her patients don't let their conditions keep them from living their lives.

"What struck me most was how happy these people are despite their circumstances and how loving and affectionate they are," she says.

The fact that the patients wouldn't get looked after otherwise isn't lost on them either, she says. Every year, when the CAMTA team first arrives in the hospital, there are hundreds of people happily awaiting their arrival and giving them a royal welcome.

"The first time I went [to the clinic], they were clapping when we walked in," she explains. "Oh my God, it was ridiculous. They put you on such a pedestal, and it feels



JUNETTE HUYNH

DEDICATED DOC Wensel discusses her experiences helping the poor in Quito.

so undeserving. You don't feel like you're worthy of this."

But the joy can be short-lived. The day after the CAMTA team arrives at the clinic, all candidates for surgery are interviewed. Both because of time constraints and a lack of proper equipment, some people are always turned

down—and Wensel is often the person that has to break the news.

"It's really emotional, [and] there's a lot of tears," Wensel says. "I haven't really figured out the right technique without being affected emotionally. That's the reality—you can only do so much."

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