

Experiences from the field: Bolivia

By Savitha Bonthala

From April 1-May 3, I had the privilege of completing my public health field study in Bolivia, South America. Through Touro University and The Central Boliviano Association, under the direction of Sarah Sullivan and Gonzalo Claude Medina, I was connected to a local NGO in Bolivia. For a period of five weeks I worked with the NGO – PROCOSI – which stands for Program de Coordinacion en Salud Integral.

PROCOSI is a large umbrella NGO with several international and national NGOs that work directly underneath it. It began in 1987 when three US based NGOs working in the health field in Bolivia put together a proposal to manage USAID child survival grants.

Over time, this network, which came to be known as PROCOSI, grew into an organization of 24 national and international NGOs with the express mission to “improve the health of the neediest population, especially children and women, by means of inter-institutional coordination; the strengthening of member institutions; and advocating policies that influence health and quality of life of the Bolivian population.”

Specifically within PROCOSI, I had the wonderful experience of collaborating with COMBI. Initially designed by the World Health Organization’s Mediterranean Centre for Vulnerability Reduction (WMC) in Tunis, COMBI incorporates lessons learned from over fifty years of public health research and methodology. By drawing from experience of private sector communication, it is a unique methodology that combines marketing, education, communication, promotion, advocacy and mobilization approaches.

COMBI has been executed in several countries across the developing world to prevent and control dengue fever. However, for the first time in history, it is now being applied to malaria, and specifically in Bolivia.

Specifically, COMBI stands for Communication for Behavioral Impact. COMBI Malaria in Bolivia has the express mission: “Behavior change prioritizing sustainable solutions for early diagnosis, complete treatment and use of preventative measures [for malaria].” In other words, this project is aimed at targeting and changing the behaviors of Bolivian citizens to reduce the mortality and morbidity associated with malaria.

PROCOSI won a competitive bidding process to implement COMBI in 28 municipalities across Bolivia. The headquarters for COMBI Malaria are located in La Paz, Bolivia under the direction of Jorge Mirabal, MD/MPH. However, the targeted regions in Bolivia for malaria prevention and education are carried out by three NGOs. The three NGOs are Caritas, Esperanza and Proagro. Caritas works in the Pando region of Bolivia, Esperanza works in Tarija, and Proagro works in Chuquisaca and Potosi regions of Bolivia. (see map)

I was initially set up to work with COMBI by the suggestion of Senor Sergio Ciales, director of general services at PROCOSI. I was welcomed to PROCOSI with open arms and great enthusiasm from Sergio and the staff.

My first two weeks at PROCOSI were dedicated to reading reports about COMBI malaria and getting an understanding of what the project was about, its goals and how it was being executed. In addition, I read reports on the Roll Back Malaria Program – an evidence based methodology on preventing malaria in the developing world.

However, during my first two weeks I also faced health problems adjusting to the altitude in La Paz. The city is approximately 12,000 feet above sea level – higher than anything I had been accustomed to. Growing up on sea level my entire life, I had difficulty adjusting to this towering city. Symptoms of altitude sickness include headache, nausea, vomiting, lethargy, dizziness and poor sleep. Personally, I dealt with nausea, abdominal pain, and poor sleep.

My gastrointestinal system took the biggest shock while I was here. I would often wake up with horrible abdominal cramps in the middle of the night. To protect myself, I was extremely careful in what I ate and drank but for some reason my GI system could not make up its mind. My sleep patterns were abnormal and at best, I would get four hours of sleep a night while dealing with my GI issues.

Just six months prior to my arrival in La Paz I dealt with a host of medical problems that left me wondering whether I could graduate medical school on time. After abdominal surgery, two emergency room visits, chronic abdominal pain of unknown origin, and a freak accident that left me handicapped for two weeks, I doubted whether or not I would even be able to come abroad.

I took one day at a time, coping with my health problems and slowly started the road to recovery. However, I was in no way "healed" by the time I decided to go abroad. Thus, the first two weeks of my stay in La Paz were significantly more difficult. Every time I woke up in the middle of the night with horrible cramps, I wondered if I had made the right decision for my health.

In the midst of my own health issues, my grandmother in the United States was hospitalized for severe health problems. I would call my family daily on skype to get updates on her status and felt a tremendous amount of guilt for not being able to be at her side. Because of this, I felt isolated in Bolivia and started counting down my days to my return to the states.

However, I decided to pull through and make the best of my time here in Bolivia. Every week got exponentially better in terms of my health and my experiences in Bolivia.

On the weekends I traveled to experience the highlights of Bolivia -- climbing Chocaltaya Montana, visiting Valley de la Luna, shopping near Iglesia de San Francisco, and going to bachata dance classes. In addition, I took Spanish lessons at a local school where I became good friends with my Spanish teacher, Cecilia.

At PROCOSI, I was surrounded by positive, motivated, and genuinely compassionate public health professionals. Every day I would be greeted by staff with a kiss on the cheek, common to Latin culture but absent in American society. Just the simple act of this exchange made me see the beauty of Latin culture. I felt as if I was part of a family – not just a medical student completing my public health field study.

Once a week I would travel to the medical school in La Paz, Facultad de Medicina, to attend public health lectures with Dr. Oscar Lanza. We discussed the social determinants of health, inequalities in the health care system in Bolivia, and a person's universal right to health. According to the World Health Organization, health is not merely an absence of disease but a state of "complete physical, mental and social well being." After leaving those lectures every week, I felt inspired and motivated. I left with a deep feeling that once again, I had found my calling in medicine.

My time in Bolivia started to quickly pass and I became aware of how fortunate I was to be in a country working with truly amazing public health professionals. As my body started to adjust to the altitude and my grandmother's health became stable, I could truly see the beauty of the work COMBI did for the citizens of Bolivia.

The highlight of my trip was my fourth weekend in Bolivia. I had the privilege to travel to Pando in the Bolivian Amazon with Dr. Mirabal, the director of COMBI, to perform site visits on malaria education. The Bolivian Amazon has approximately 80% of malarial cases due to its tropical nature and the opportunity for mosquitoes to breed rampantly.

To get to the actual location of our malarial education site, we had to travel deep into the Amazon. We crossed many rivers and drove extensively into the jungle to reach our destinations. To cross rivers we would drive

our SUV onto a wooden raft that would float across the expansiveness of the waters. All the while, I was fascinated and excited about being part of this journey.

Once we finally reached our destination, three members of the NGO Caritas led an educational session for twenty nursing students at the University of Pando. A projector was used to display videos and power point slides across a white wall. The nursing students received in depth information about the pathophysiology, signs and symptoms and treatments of malaria. In addition, they were given a lesson in personal development and leadership. I was fascinated with how thorough and exact the medical information was presented but I was deeply moved by the additional focus on youth leadership.

Prior to my work in Bolivia, I had the opportunity to do informal malaria education sessions in Uganda. The work I did in Uganda was on a much smaller scale with a computer to aid my assistance, one other colleague and posters displaying the signs, symptoms and treatment of malaria. We traveled to three schools in a small village to educate children. I had never seen or realized that large scale projects like COMBI existed and how significantly they impacted the health of populations.

COMBI Malaria not only focused on education sessions tailored to meet the needs of health professionals, families, and communities but it also developed a systematic way to diagnose and treat affected individuals. Community health workers would be assigned in each community that served as volunteers to help disseminate information about malaria. In addition they would stress the importance of any person in a household who showed signs of fever to go to the local health clinic to get tested for malaria. If a person was positive, they would be given free treatment.

Moreover, to stress the importance of recognizing the signs of malaria and following through with the appropriate treatment, COMBI Malaria created several household items with logos to help families remember the symptoms of malaria and the importance to follow through with the entire treatment course. These logos were dawned on many items ranging from notebooks, calendars, mugs and even bath tubs for small babies.

Travelling back to La Paz, I had time to reflect about my experiences in the Amazon and the impact COMBI had on the Bolivian people. During my five weeks, I created a tool for COMBI to help them measure and evaluate their current system. As my time quickly drew to a close I wondered if what I had done had been useful and if PROCOSI would be receptive to my work. I handed in my final report during my last week and hoped for the best.

On my last day in the office there was an announcement to meet in the cafeteria downstairs. I joined Dr. Mirabal and Sergio, standing in a corner and listening to speeches for a dear co-worker who would be leaving PROCOSI. To my surprise, the attention shifted towards me and the head of PROCOSI, Dr. Carreno, started thanking me for my work. Then, Sergio, director of general services, also expressed gratitude for my work. Finally, Dr. Mirabal, who I had worked so closely and travelled with for five weeks, started speaking about my work -- how I helped COMBI Malaria and his appreciation for my time here. I could only stare at the floor as Dr. Mirabal spoke because if I made eye contact with him I knew I would start crying. I was handed a bouquet of flowers and given hugs by every member of the office.

This marked my last day of medical school and never in my life had I gotten this kind of recognition for my work. As I left the office I made the seven block journey back to my homestay. I cried the entire seven blocks because I was overwhelmed with the gratitude I received and humbled by my experiences in Bolivia. I met people who were so dedicated and passionate about helping improve the lives of others that it inspired me to continue my path towards becoming a healer.

I am inspired by Dr. Remen who states, "We are all here for a single purpose: to grow in wisdom and to learn to love better. Life is the ultimate teacher, but it is usually through experience and not scientific research that

we discover its deepest lessons.” So thank you Bolivia for giving me such rich experiences that have helped me grow in wisdom but ultimately have made me love better.