

Peru Journey, September 2007

Two weeks ago, a woman, Olga Lattarulo, whom I had never met, called me to ask if I would like to join a team of medical professionals going to Peru. A 7.9 Richter Scale earthquake had occurred on August 15th. I had never heard of COPEA (Comunidad Peruana Americana), a Boston based community organization providing various social and cultural services such as immigration help to Peruvians in New England. Olga had put together a group of Peruvian-American doctors, nurses and social workers to help those affected by the earthquake. After meeting with them, I agreed to be a part of the team that included three other doctors. Still, I had my reservations since this group had never done anything like this before and I was told we had to bring our own tents and water and food as none would be available in the field. It sounded like an adventure to me.

At Logan airport on Saturday, September eighth, we met at the ticket counter, where I learned that two doctors had dropped out and that Dr. Ellie, (Elizabeth Cuentras, a pediatrician from Hartford) and I would be seeing all the patients. What had I gotten myself into? After a long flight (ten hours including a transfer in Atlanta) we arrived in Lima after midnight. How many times in my life had I had similar experiences, landing at a developing world airport late at night? Why are these airports always so smelly (like gasoline exhaust or jet fuel)? And why is the ride into the city always on winding, bumpy, potholed streets with colorful storefronts and advertising signs alongside them?

Loading up the pickup and the SUV early the next morning, we headed south on the Pan American Highway with our team. Our team was, Dr Ellie, Dr. Antonio (fortunately, Dr. Antonio, the Dean of the Medical School of the San Juan Bautista University in Lima that helped plan this mission decided to come along), Olga, Marta Chea (public health nurse living near Andover), Gloria Torres (social worker from Springfield) and Maximo Torres(Editor of El Mundo, a Spanish newspaper in Boston) and myself. Our drivers were off-duty Lima policemen which made me feel safer even though there was really nothing to be afraid of. The highway was mostly very straight and level and the landscape was arid and dessert like except for the small towns and the irrigated areas. The coast was to our right side and small mountains to our left. It became a little dicey when the road dropped down to only two lanes with the speed limit staying at 100 kilometers per hour (60 MPH). Our driver, who seemed to be excellent, kept it at about 140 to 150 KPH and I don't remember ever being passed by anyone. Remember that this is a two lane road with many large trucks and buses on it and passing was slightly dangerous. All along the side of the road were crucifixes and little shrines indicating where there had been a fatal accident. Every mile had at least one and sometimes as many as ten of these reminders of the danger. I tried to ignore them as I trusted our driver who had been a police officer for twenty seven years. While talking to him a week later after we returned to Lima, he said that he had only been in six accidents in his career. I'm glad I didn't know this at the beginning of the trip.



After about three hours we began to see the first signs of the terramoto (earthquake) with fallen walls and cracks on buildings. Detouring around a bridge that was damaged, we decided to make a side trip to Pisco, a coastal town near the epicenter of the quake. By then the overcast sky had cleared into a bright sunny day. All over the town were many signs of destruction but much of the rubble had already been removed from the buildings in the search for survivors and bodies and many piles of adobe bricks and debris covered every street making some of them impassable.



The lucky inhabitants had tents or improvised structures to sleep in.



Even though greatly destroyed, one could see by the few remaining walls that this was once a pretty coastal town sitting on a busy harbor with fishing boats lining the seashore and old Spanish Colonial architecture that, sadly, will never be reconstructed in that style.



They don't make buildings like this anymore and I'd be surprised if this town comes back to life in the next decade. Kind of made me think of New Orleans with its widespread destruction. If we can't put that city together, what chance is there for this poor place? The inhabitants didn't seem to have too much visible emotion but I hadn't talked to any of them yet. There were many soldiers and police around to prevent any looting but it all seemed calm to me. The main church in the center of town only had two towers standing. The rubble of the collapsed nave had already been removed.



I was told that forty five people died in a hotel whose first floor collapsed trapping many foreign tourists. .



I stayed way back when I took this photo.

There were not very many people in the town and I later found out that many, if not most, of the inhabitants had, wisely, left to live with relatives elsewhere. In all, 600 people died, 20,000 injured and one hundred to two hundred thousand people made homeless in this region. Luckily, the earthquake struck in the afternoon when many people were out at work or there would have been many more injuries and deaths. It's going to be hard to rebuild if there are no jobs and no people. Pisco is an important center for the surrounding agriculture and fishing industry so there may be some hope. Again, sort of like New Orleans; it'll take many years to get anywhere near what the city was previously. The people that I did see on the streets did not particularly seem traumatized but remember that this was three weeks after the terramoto. It must have been a

nightmare here. Later on, when I was able to speak with my patients during our clinics, I heard of the terror that they had when the ground went “up and down and side to side”.

An hour after our diversion in Pisco, we arrived at our hotel in Ica a big town that had less damage than Pisco but still with many signs of the destruction all over. When I signed on for this trip, I was told that we were going to sleep in tents (I brought two). Luckily, one of our team had good connections and found this beautiful small hotel in Ica, 45 minutes away from the little town we were to work in. I later gave the tents, my sleeping bag and almost all of my clothes to local people. After dropping off our luggage, we took off to San Jose de Los Molinos, our destination.

Arriving in the afternoon after passing many fields of grape vines and other crops via a dirt road, we saw destruction all around but luckily, not as severe as in Pisco. Only 4 people had died in San Jose. We decided that it was too late to start seeing patients that day and we that we would begin early Monday morning. To our luck, there was an event going on in the central plaza in front to the town hall (I think it was entertainment with a public health message) and the Mayor introduced us to the crowd. We all got to say a few words to the town's people there and we invited them to return in the morning for our clinic. My Spanish always improves rapidly when I use it and I really couldn't express myself as well as I wanted but I am sure they got my point. The Mayor had cleared out a couple of rooms for us on the second floor of the town hall and we unloaded our supplies from the pickup. Although we brought some supplies from the States, most of the medications were preordered in Peru and the delivery truck arrived later that afternoon. While we were unloading the supplies, a woman came up to us and asked for our help with her young child who had a fever. Dr Ellie, the pediatrician, Marta, the public health nurse, and I followed her back to her home which was about a mile or so away. I took a flashlight as it was late.

The woman was thirty four and she had nine kids, the oldest 20 years old and the youngest, the sick one, three years old. Luckily, their house had survived since it was not made of the traditional adobe brick, but instead it was made of branches covered with plastic. The sick child, to me, looked much younger than three and she had a fever of 103 degrees. While Dr Ellie was examining the girl, I checked out the Mom and an older sister who both had a cough. The little girl had right lower lobe pneumonia and we went back for medicine. On returning to the town hall, we realized that the antibiotics that we ordered did not arrive with the sterile water that must be added to reconstitute them. We were able to call for help and get someone to pick up this water in a pharmacy back in Ica and have it delivered back to the town. We waited about an hour and a half for the water and the child got her medicine. This girl was very sick and since her family was very poor, she might not have been brought to a doctor and she may have died if Dr. Elizabeth hadn't been here.

As an aside; on the way to the child's house, we passed a cemetery that had been much damaged in the quake. In this cemetery, most of the graves were above ground in stacks of crypts and many had fallen apart. Several caskets were open exposing the skeletons totally. Yes, it was eerie, especially since it was three weeks since the terramoto. Later I

found out that the resting places that were most destroyed were the oldest and they would be more likely to not have close living relatives to repair them. Besides, there were many other priorities such as food, water and shelter before repairing the graves. It was dusk when we passed the cemetery and it was incredibly beautiful with the setting sun shining on the surrounding mountains and adobe orange town or what was left of it. Still, the cemetery was a bit spooky that evening.



After we got back to our hotel for dinner, we had a great meal. The cuisine in Peru is excellent and we had great meals every night after our work was done. I also learned that this area was a major grape growing region and that some of the grapes were concentrated into a strong brew called Pisco. A few Pisco sours and we loosened up and I learned of Dr. Antonio's and Maximo's great sense of humor. Here were the Dean of a School of Medicine and the editor of a newspaper hanging loose and telling lewd jokes. We were starting to bond but we didn't stay up late since we knew we would be working hard the next few days but I did not realize how hard.

Arriving at San Jose de los Molinos the next day, there was already a very large crowd awaiting us. From our room on the second floor of the Town Hall, the lines extended down the stairs and out of the building.



Marta preaching public health to the waiting patients

Even though we were not fully set up, we started quickly to see patients. One room was set up to sort of register the patients and Olga, Gloria and Marta worked tirelessly taking patients histories and blood pressures and passed the form to us doctors as the patients entered our room. We also had a group of student nurses from a local school to help us.



Olga, our tireless leader registering patients

Dr Antonio and I shared an exam table and Dr Ellie had her own table. From nine in the morning until 7:30 PM when we decided to stop, we saw over three hundred patients. I saw the least at about ninety and fortunately they were not too serious and I also had Dr. Antonio to refer to if I had a problem such as when I was given a very pregnant woman with abdominal pain. I know little if anything about pregnant women.



Dr. Antonio with patient

We were so busy that we couldn't even stop for lunch and I wasn't even thinking about eating but just in getting through the day. Marta, our nurse who is crazy about public health, lost her voice after spending the day in the hall preaching the virtues of sanitation and proper diets and cleanliness.

If we had arrived closer to the date of the earthquake, we would have surely have seen much trauma but we saw mostly minor illnesses such as upper respiratory disease, back pain, arthritis, and skin problems. Very many also complained of eye irritation which is understandable given the dust that must have been present during the quake and the ensuing cleanup. I quickly learned the Spanish names of the medicines to use. I learned to work fast and I soon realized that most of the problems were not serious and that this was an opportunity for them to see a doctor and receive medicine for free. I felt bad when we didn't have the correct medication a patient needed and I had to give them a prescription. My guess is that the chances of the scripts being filled were low since they had to pay for it themselves and it was at least an hour's bus ride to the nearest pharmacy. In my office in Brookline, I have plenty of time for chit chat with my patients but I had much less time for that here. Still, surprisingly, I was able to ask them about there lives since and before the earthquake. I also had to make sure they understood the directions to take the meds. Even though I wrote them on the box, I don't think they all could read that well.



When I was deciding whether to undertake this trip or not, I wasn't sure that we could help much in such few days but I am sure that we did a lot of good for most of the patients that we saw. Their gratitude and thanks was evident in their faces and their embraces. The days became a blur as we saw patient after patient. I was able to remember many of them since we had our encounter form for each of them and because Maximo, our newspaper guy went loco taking photos of us at work when he wasn't assisting us. When his cameras batteries failed, he borrowed mine and he took over a hundred photos with it. I usually don't have many photos of myself when I do my work in Public Health Education but now I have so many of my work in Peru. I had to tell him to cut it out by the second day. You know how those professional journalists are with their cameras. One of my favorites was a ninety year old woman who walked for two hours with her walking sticks to see us.



Maximo. Always helping

She told me I was the first doctor she had been to in her life. Cool! I got along well with the little old ladies and the nurses passed many of them to me. Meanwhile, Dr. Antonio and Dr. Ellie were also very busy with their own patients. I realized that Dr. Antonio didn't have to examine his patients much but mostly talked to them and figured out their diagnoses easily. Luckily most of our patients were not too complicated. I gave out a lot of acetomenophen (Tylenol) and amoxicillin but I also diagnosed a woman with diabetes and I also got to counsel the daughter of a man who I believed had early dementia and several other complex patients.



Gloria, La Senora and Me

They need more help than we could provide but at least they have a start in getting additional care. We all were very tired by the end of the day and the dinner and the Pisco were delicious. Peruvian food is excellent and since Maximo and Dr. Antonio were food connoisseurs, we went to some great, inexpensive restaurants that were open. Dr Antonio was born and raised nearby and people who knew him were always coming up to us to greet him. He's a great man.



Dr. Ellie with her little patient

The second day, Dr Ellie, our pediatrician, had trouble with her asthma before breakfast and I was so worried that she wouldn't be able to come back with us to San Jose. Dr Antonio knows something about kids but I know nothing about them but luckily she felt well enough to work. Whew! I don't know what we would have done without her. We all worked very hard but in my opinion, Dr. Ellie was the super champ of our team. Also, her niece, Silvia who lived nearby, came and helped her as a nurse. Whew! We could use all the help we could get. We arrived at about 10AM since we had to first go into a larger town to buy a few medicines that we did not have the day before. Again there was a giant crowd of town folks awaiting us. I thought we would have a repeat of the day before so I worked real fast but it slowed down in the afternoon and we left early to have an early supper. We had seen over two hundred patients in four hours. By this time we had really come together as a working group and we developed a lot of camaraderie. This was an intense, shared experience that we will not forget and I now have a new set of fantastic friends.



Olga and Marta at work in the church.

We decided to go to another site for our last day of work and Olga knew a priest who invited us to work in his church that had survived the terramoto with just a bunch of cracks. She was our terrific coordinator and leader. When we arrived, there was no one waiting and at first we predicted that we would only see a few patients but after Maximo started making announcements over the church's loudspeakers, the people came streaming in and it was another long, busy day. Although I was so tired, I felt really good about what I was doing and even while working fast, I felt that I was able to spend quality time with the patients. Again, their thankfulness was very evident and our work was very rewarding. These people, who have suffered so much, still have so much work to do. What is sad is that now that the initial trauma is over, public aid has slowed down to this region and who really cares about these poor people? Who's going to put money into rebuilding their homes? They were struggling before the terramoto but now they have much less. Now they had no home, no clothes, no one to help them. The average wage for a day's work in the fields is four or five dollars which is barely enough to buy some food for their family. Who really cares?

Our last day in Peru consisted of the drive back to Lima and a recognition ceremony at the University of San Juan Bautista. I don't remember ever being so tired but I felt really good about what we accomplished. We had hoped to affect five hundred people and we saw almost twice that number. Before the trip, I had serious doubts about how much our small group could really help these poor people but I am absolutely sure they will remember us for a long time. We did good.



Ceremony with the University President