



Mission Possible: Peru



By George Meyer, MD

MY WIFE AND I RECENTLY RETURNED from a trip to Peru as volunteers for Health Volunteers Overseas (HVO). We had previously spent the months of February 2000 and 2003 in St Lucia. Both countries provided unique educational experiences for us, professionally and personally. HVO provides internal medicine teaching volunteers to hospitals in Peru, Cambodia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Bangalore, India. Other specialties offer similar opportunities in these and other countries.

EsSALUD is the Peruvian government-run health program for its employees. It covers about 6 million lives or 20 percent of the population. Two large hospitals in Lima, the capital, are major referral centers. Each GI unit has a special GI bleeding ward. I spent one week at each hospital.

Peru has three distinct climate areas, La Costa (the coast), La Sierra (the mountains), and La Selva (the rainforest part of the Amazon basin). Consequently, there is a wide variety of diseases to be seen, especially in tertiary referral centers in Lima. Amebic disease is not rare, neither are abscesses caused by amebic and bacterial infections. One patient I saw had drunk water from the Amazon headwaters area, leading to an amebic abscess of the liver. Typhoid is frequently diagnosed, though often based on the outdated Widal test. Some patients probably have non-typhoid salmonella disease. Other interesting patients I saw included a young woman with Budd-Chiari syndrome, a teenager with cirrhosis due to autoimmune hepatitis, one with abdominal wall pain, and several with hepatitis B. AIDs is a common problem.

The GI bleeding unit at Rebagliatti Hospital is renowned in South America, accepting GI fellows from many South American countries. They perform endoscopy and therapy for many GI bleeders. Cirrhosis is common and sclerotherapy is the treatment of choice for variceal bleeders. Unemployment is high in Peru and many desperate people attempt suicide. A common method is to drink muriatic acid, which destroys not only the esophagus but also the stomach. Those surviving surgery often have strictures at the anastomosis of the bowel loop and esophagus. Endoscopic dilation with Savary dilators was an everyday experience.

The morning at each hospital usually consisted of a talk, not always by the HVO visitor, followed by rounds, usually with a different team each day. One GI fellow gave a superb presentation on liver abscesses.

EsSALUD does not pay doctors well, so by 1 or 2 p.m. most go to their private practices, leaving the volunteer free for sightseeing or other teaching opportunities. In the evenings, the staff went out of their way to entertain us. The hospitality was outstanding and the people friendly. They were as excited to improve their English as to share medical experiences.

As the center of Spanish South American political and economic power for centuries, Lima has magnificent museums and interesting historic sites; which can be visited on weekends. A trip to Cuzco and Machu Picchu is a must. Other potential trips include Lake

Titicaca on the Bolivian border, the Amazon headwaters, or northern Peru, where new explorations have found hitherto untouched Inca treasures.

Health Volunteers Overseas can be reached at its web site, www.hvousa.org, or contacted at:

1900 L Street NW, Suite 310
Washington, DC 20036 Tel: (202) 296-0928
Fax: (202) 296-8018 info@hvousa.org

geowmeyer1@earthlink.net

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

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