



Global Health Activism Among Medical Students



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AS THE SACRAMENTO CONVENTION CENTER flooded with global health advocates, on April 3-5, I was not surprised to see the rising interest in today's medical students and physician leaders in global health, as awareness of the scarcity of healthcare in third world countries becomes more apparent.

The 17th Annual Global Health Education Consortium was hosted here in Sacramento with the support of the UC Davis School of Medicine and led by its founder and conference chair, Anvar Velji. The conference was a great success and most impressive features were the idealism and enthusiastic participation of physicians-in-training - medical students.

It was a testament to the desire in so many of us seeking change in the status and access of medical care around the globe. When I say "us," I speak for over 300 medical students among 500 participants who came from across the country and around the world to share their interests, projects, and innovative ideas; their attempts at changing the face of health care on a global level.

Many physicians who have long led the movement were taken aback by the energy of the students; they had never experienced such an impressive and widespread involvement from any part of the medical community. At the conference, students not only heard from experienced and respected physicians in the field, but also shared their own experiences during panels with their peers, and through poster presentations covering a broad spectrum of matters that make up "global health."

The level of scrutiny in evaluating and managing healthcare in various regions of the world made clear the importance of what we are trying to do today in the field of global health.

At the 17th annual conference, "ethics" was the main theme behind the discussions. Many students shared their concerns that global health not be simply "medical tourism"; certain popular or attractive countries have gained popularity for project destinations when so many other regions of the world have far more desperate needs for outside help. Several students had evaluated big-name programs such as Unite for Sight as to how and where they deliver care and whether or not it was truly serving a population still in need.

I was surprised to see the degree of analysis that medical students used in evaluating the justification for and quality of programs. It seems like a major shift from simply deploying projects to ensuring that quality programs are being established with meaningful and long-lasting outcomes.

Rohan Radhakrishna from UC Berkeley presented his award winning project in Northern Uganda following the "night commuters," children who sequester themselves each night to avoid being captured and conscripted or worse by armed gangs. His focus was on why

they continued to fear their homes at night even after violence had subsided in their region. Not only did he evaluate the children, he returned a year later with a plan of action that would address the needs of these children and help resolve this particular problem in Uganda.

This is only one example of what is being done by the global health community, among dozens we heard about at the conference. It no longer suffices to travel to a region, do some preliminary research or provide temporary care without having a plan for resolution.

Projects like this are happening all over the world from Kazakhstan to Darfur to our backyard here in Sacramento; students are sharing their thoughts and innovations regarding how to assess the situation, set up a project, and evaluate the outcome, how to surmount obstacles.

Overall, I was impressed by the attendance of so many students from around the country and their enthusiasm in the advancements of global health. The conference opened my eyes to the endless aspects of healthcare being addressed in the local and global community and the importance of establishing programs that will have a lasting impact. It is refreshing to see everywhere, and here at UC Davis, students addressing global health problems.

I hope that we will continue to pave the way as we try diligently to close the gap in healthcare across the world. I hope we continue to acknowledge that healthcare is an important concern in our country but also continue to advocate for its need outside of our borders as well.

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Medical students involved in global health and hundreds of other dirt-under-the-nails global health activists were brought together by the silent plight of millions of the earth's people. Fifty student global health projects were the subject of displays and discussion. Three days of speakers, too many to list individually, were an eclectic collection of luminaries including UCD's Claire Pomeroy, Joe Silva, Faith Fitzgerald (no one breathes when she speaks!), Fred Meyer, Sergio Aguilar G., Michael Wilkes, and Blanca Solis; Permanente Medical Group CEO Robbie Pearl; and former minister of health for Mexico, Julio Frenk, now the holder of the Gates-Buffet-Slim philanthropic purse strings. In a classic multispeaker and discussion format they spoke to and with participants whose vision and activities are focused on the world. Despite the stellar collection of speakers involved and experienced in global health, the most impressive feature of the conference was the students. Their enthusiasm, cultural, linguistic, and personal diversity, was new DNA to the body of global health. Their hard-headed idealism was evident in their projects, faces, and their personal effort to explore and to move the medical earth beneath our feet. Albert Schweitzer and Paul Farmer, move over; there are those who will join you. 17th Annual kudos to Dr. Velji, UCD, Kaiser/PMG, and Karen Lam of the Global Health Consortium. - J.L.

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