

Medical Care in Mexico

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Medical care is in increasingly short supply. In 2020 the Association of American Medical Colleges predicted that the US would be short between 54,100 and 139,000 doctors by 2033. Here in New Mexico, we have lost 700 primary care doctors between 2017 and 2021 and are 334 doctors below the national benchmark.

This is bad news but it could be worse. We could be like the area on the west side of Juárez where I work with a number of humanitarian groups and where medical care is almost non-existent. What can be done? Here are several innovative approaches.

Siguiendo los Pasos de Jesus (SPJ) is an El Paso-based NGO that is mostly known for building houses in this area. Founded 24 years ago by the dynamic Jane Fuller, also known as La Gringa, SPJ has built roughly 500 houses, using local labor and raising money mostly via its annual fundraiser at the El Paso Country Club. When my wife, Julie died in 2016, her many friends contributed funds to build a home for a woman named Elvira Romero and her grandkids, Hector and Yeira Beltran. Although Elvira is now deceased, the home has been a powerful stabilizing force for these two grandkids. This is a lesson for all of us – a house to live in is like a foundation.

However, Fuller knows that housing isn't enough; her goal for SPJ is to build a community. She has built a library which has a video and computer room, two community parks, one for kids up to the age of 12 and another with a soccer field and a basketball court, a community kitchen, a sewing and tutoring room and a mercado where locals can buy and sell their goods as well as an exercise area. Most important, she has established relations with the El Paso medical community and now – post COVID – medical personnel are coming to her clinic once a month to provide care for the community, mostly women and their children. I was there on February 4 and saw the hope on the faces of these women as they waited for care that had previously been non-existent.

Although he wasn't able to attend the last session, Dr. Carlos Gutierrez from Paso del Norte Pediatrics is the leader and had participated many times in the past. On this occasion Doctor Longoria was the leader – his first visit - and three nurses came with him. They would see sixty to seventy patients on their visit.

Vision in Action is located only a few miles away. It is a mental asylum, founded by a former addict named José Antonio Galván, houses roughly 120 patients and has survived without government funds for twenty-eight years. More than ten years ago, a local hospital dumped a man named Josué Rosales there, believing that he was about to die from drug-related issues. Cared for by other patients, Josué survived, earned a nursing degree and became the principal on-site caregiver. Their psychiatrist was a somber man named Vicente Pantoja and for \$50 a visit, he would make the long drive every Sunday. Now both are gone and we are rebuilding the program with donations from some fifty friends. One part

is a woman patient named Viridiana Torres who came to Vision in Action six years ago, has excellent mathematical skills and now does much of the accounting but is also taking medical courses on line so that she can be the on-site medical person. We are buying the needed medical equipment she needs. We have also hired two nurses, a major accomplishment given how far Vision in Action is from the center of the city where most medical professionals live and work. This is not perfection; emergency services, for example, are many miles away as are hospitals but these patients will have better care than the people who live in the surrounding area.

Respettrans, a migrant shelter in the center of Juárez has a different program for the 250-400 migrants sheltered there. Several weeks ago when I tripped and fell outside, scraping my hands and knees, two of the migrant women insisted on washing and bandaging the minor wounds. Who knows what training they had received but they cared deeply and wouldn't let me go until I was bandaged up.

Medical care ought to be a right but it clearly isn't either in the US or Mexico. In the US, we spend a staggering amount on medical care but get less than we deserve. In Mexico, the government spends almost nothing but people improvise and end up with much more than what you would expect. This has to change eventually but in the meantime, talented and determined individuals like Fuller, Galván, Viridiana Torres and those two caring nurses at Respettrans are doing their best to fill the gap.

Morgan Smith travels to the border at least once a month to document conditions there. He can be reached at Morgan-smith@comcast.net.