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Gruber brings health to Honduran children



Alice Gruber (center) meets with a mother and her children at the Roatan clinic.

A 1962 graduate of Illinois Wesleyan's nursing program, Alice (Schrader) Gruber has been involved in health care for most of her life. But at the Roatan Volunteer Pediatric Clinic in Honduras, she was shocked when she found herself faced with a child with rickets. The disease, often caused by poor nutrition, is very rare in the U.S. "I'd never even seen a case of rickets before," she says.

The Roatan clinic is part of Global Healing, a U.S.-based, 501(c) non-profit organization dedicated to bringing modern medicine to the developing world. As the organization's chief financial officer and the Roatan Clinic's volunteer coordinator, Alice draws on her experience in nursing as well as her M.B.A. in international business to assist Global Healing's goal of "empowering

a population to take care of its own," she says. The group works directly with local governments, health-care providers, businesses, public institutions, and private citizens to help achieve this goal.

In 2003, Global Healing focused energies on Roatan, a tiny island of Honduras, one of Central America's poorest countries. Recognizing the government was unable to meet the medical needs of the pediatric population, Dr. Arup Roy-Burman and Dr. Sheila Jenkins established a modern pediatric outpatient clinic, available without charge to all Honduran children five days a week, year round. Several times a year, Alice and her pediatrician husband travel to Honduras to coordinate the clinic's medical activities.

More than 65 percent of Hondurans live in poverty, and children are a large part of this number. Honduras also has the highest incidence of HIV infection in Central America. Many of the families living on Roatan are Honduran mainlanders who come to the island, a diving hotspot and cruise ship stop, looking for work in the tourism-based economy. But for the 60,000 island residents, there is only one public hospital and only one permanent pediatrician.

Before the volunteer pediatric clinic opened, “these children really had very little medical care,” Alice says. “The concept of preventative health care — of taking a child to the pediatrician every three months or six months, of well-child visits — was unheard of,” she says. “Our clinic is trying to develop that.” Common diagnoses include malnutrition, malaria, dengue fever, gastrointestinal parasites, respiratory infections, asthma, and skin infections.

“Educational outreach is now a vital component of the clinic,” Alice says. “Our volunteer physicians do newborn physicals each morning in the hospital, participate in rounds in the public hospital pediatric ward, and take care of clinic patients.” Global Healing also recently established a well-child physical exam program at a local daycare facility. Last year the organization sponsored a nurse-practitioner volunteer to go out into the community to help teach mothers how to recognize when their children need professional medical attention.

Global Healing supports a native Honduran physician who is in the clinic at all times; the remaining staff is comprised of pediatricians and third-year pediatric residents who rotate on a one-month basis. Some are physicians just finishing their fellowships or training who want to practice in a completely different setting; others are semi-retired. There’s no problem with recruitment — “I’m talking to someone two or three times per week who wants to come,” says Alice.

Practicing even the most basic medicine in Roatan can be challenging. In the hospital where the clinic is based, “we had no toilets that flushed. The water ran lime-green. Our waiting area was just a hallway,” Alice says. The hospital’s lab is open for two hours a day — a stark contrast to the 24/7 schedule of U.S. hospitals. Complicating matters are power outages that can last for hours.

An even bigger challenge has been a long-held mindset about health care on the island that can lead to life-threatening situations. Alice remembers a mother who had given birth to a premature baby in the hospital, but after a month-long stay she became frustrated with the medical care and left without receiving instructions on how to care for her tiny newborn. “No one told her that her baby needed constant feedings. No one had told her how to take care of this baby. We became her support, and that’s what it’s all about,” Alice says. “Someone has to care, someone has to follow up. And no one was following these kids.”

“What we’re really trying to do is get the community doctors and people involved,” Alice says. Local self-sufficiency is the goal in all of Global Healing’s projects — a goal that has already been achieved in such projects as the pediatric cardiac diagnosis, surgery and treatment center established by Global Healing in Tbilisi, Georgia, in the former Soviet Union.

The organization is considering a location for its next project, which will “likely be somewhere else in Central America or possibility another center in Tbilisi, Georgia,” says Alice. Meanwhile, in Roatan, Global Healing physicians have now attended to more than 13,000 children in the Volunteer Pediatric Clinic. “So many are involved in making something like this happen,” notes Alice. “Donors, volunteers — and, most of all, the people in Roatan who really want a better life for themselves and their children. They provide the inspiration that keeps us going.”