

Notes From Abroad

Yale/Johnson & Johnson International Health

October 2004, Vol. 1, No. 2

New Travel Restrictions Shut Down Cuba Site

Residents and students are no longer able to choose Cuba as a destination for their international health experience as a result of new regulations imposed by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control. The significantly tighter restrictions went into effect June 30 of this year and are part of a larger travel ban which, in addition to limiting educational travel to Cuba, also now severely limits US citizens' ability to visit first-degree relatives on the island.

Yale is one of 115 medical universities nationally that has sent medical students and residents to Cuba through the Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba (MEDICC) group. Yale residents have uniformly had positive experiences in Cuba citing the exposure to a world-renowned public health system as one of the enduring lessons. Electives in Cuba had typically been 4 weeks long. The new Bush administration regulations allow educational travel to Cuba only for a period of more than ten weeks. The majority of educational programs that

had been sending U.S. university and graduate students to Cuba— in music, art, medicine and so forth — will be shut down by the restrictions.

Economic sanctions were originally imposed against Cuba in 1963 during the Kennedy administration. Some of the travel restrictions were softened during the Clinton administration making it easier for Americans to visit family in Cuba. There was a move in Congress two years ago to loosen the travel ban further, but this lost momentum with news that several Cuban defectors returned to Cuba had been executed under the Castro regime. The new Bush administration laws were created as a result of findings of a White House panel that had investigated methods of increasing pressure on the Castro government.

For those interested, we will shortly be sending out information on how to share your views on the travel restrictions with your local and national representatives.

New Site Combines Language Study with International Health

We are proud to announce a new site in Oaxaca, Mexico which combines Spanish instruction at a nearby language school with patient care at a local hospital and its clinic. This site will be particularly helpful for those who have studied Spanish in the past but have not yet developed their skills sufficiently to be able to use them in a clinical setting.

Karen Jacobson, in Oaxaca August through September, wrote that she was having a wonderful time. “I have three hours of class in the morning followed by one hour of conversation.” “It is pretty intense and this week my class consists of only two people so we are moving pretty quickly.” She has had a chance to practice her medical Spanish both in the clinic of Dr. Tenorio, a local surgeon, and on an internal medicine floor where a wide variety of patients are being treated. She saw “cases of peritonitis..., a patient with possible pulmonary fibrosis, and a 23 yr old woman with newly found masses in brain newly diagnosed with AIDS.”

This site also has a great deal to offer to those who already have substantial language skills. Olga Cardenas, who just recently returned from Oaxaca, assumed the role of teacher and “foreign medical consultant” for the students working on the wards, where they fill roles that in the U.S. would be performed only by house staff. “As a Mexican-American doctor,” Olga writes,



“this experience served to greatly amplify my medical professional vocabulary.” She spent her mornings seeing outpatients in a daily clinic.

Oaxaca offers opportunity for rich cultural exposure, particularly given its large Zapotec population. “Oaxaca itself is beautiful,” Karen writes, “old streets with low slung stone buildings painted bright colors, and old town center.”

The ability to communicate with people in their own language obviously enhances the effectiveness of a clinician immeasurably. Additionally, language skills help break down innumerable cultural barriers as well. Given the international health needs in Central and South America, and given necessity for adequate language skills in order for clinicians to practice there, we are very excited at the early success of this novel site. We are confident that it will provide clinicians with capabilities that they will find useful for the rest of their careers.