

Abstract:

“Para la gente y el futuro” Gabriel Pontipiedra OMS II

Finishing my first year of medical school at Burrell College of Osteopathic Medicine (BCOM), I felt lost. Ever since I was a child, my goal in life was to make it into medical school and become a doctor. It was my North star, guiding every single decision, action, and sacrifice I made. However, the kind of doctor I wanted to become still remained in question and I naively believed that the answer would magically appear before me. Whether it was finding out what specialty I wanted to go into or what I needed to do to get the ideal residency spot, I hoped a new purpose would present itself to give me direction once again. Throughout the school year, I must have heard about the importance of the four tenets of osteopathic medicine and our school's motto “Para la gente y el futuro” from just about each person who came to speak to us. While I knew these principles were significant, I had failed to comprehend their true meaning and value. I also joined most of the specialty clubs my school had to offer, shadowed various medical professionals, and threw myself into any and all subjects and organ systems, hoping to find whatever it was I was looking for. Alas, all of it proved futile. So in a desperate attempt, I turned to travel, in the hopes that getting thrown out of my comfort zone would help me find my way again.

From June 22 to July 12 2017, I was blessed with the opportunity to travel to Spiti Valley, located in the state of Himachal Pradesh in India, through an organization called the Himalayan Health Exchange. I found out about this group that organizes medical relief expeditions in Northern India through a friend who took the same journey last year. All it took was one late-night burst of courage and before I knew it, I was soaked in sweat on a packed bus in the humid Delhi summer weather with nothing but the scrubs, passport, and stethoscope in my backpack, praying it was taking me to the right terminal. After many instances of miscommunication, I eventually met the company in the expedition. In addition to our guides and lead doctors, there were other medical students in our group hailing from all around the globe, including the US, Canada, UK, Australia, and Ukraine. The level of medical knowledge between everyone ranged from first-year medical student to full-fledged doctor. There were also only 2 osteopaths (myself included) among the 27 other students, many of whom had absolutely no idea that the DO profession even existed. To say I was intimidated would be an absolute understatement. Here I was, a first year osteopathic student coming from a brand new school, hailing from New Mexico, a state that one of my colleagues “didn't even know had a medical school.” Many of my peers came from schools that rejected me immediately after sending in my secondary application. On top of this, I was asked questions like “Are you more like a chiropractor then?” and “Why didn't you just take a year off then apply again MD?” After these encounters, I made a silent vow. I was going to prove to myself that I would be seen as an equal. It became my goal to represent myself, my school, and my profession to the world.

The first few clinical days were difficult for me. I had never been on any kind of medical trip abroad before. Additionally, while I had done some practice performing physical exams and certain procedures during labs and simulations in school, it was a completely different experience when it came to working on actual patients. Taking into account the language barrier, a lack of many diagnostic tools, and my general inexperience, it was needless to say that I was overwhelmed. Thankfully, I had some of the most accommodating attending doctors working with me on this expedition. They were able to answer all of my questions and assist me in instances of confusion and concern.

Traveling through the Himalayan landscape was simply remarkable. Everything from the majestic, looming mountains, to the breathtaking night sky kept redefining what I called beautiful. Trying to capture what I saw through photography proved to be an exercise in futility, as pictures did absolutely no justice to what I saw with my own eyes. What amazed me the most, however, was the culture - something that cannot be captured in a still frame. Our guide, the lama, explained that Spiti Valley stands relatively untouched by the influences of the outside world and that tradition remains a large aspect in the daily lives of the people of area. The same largely Buddhist practices and beliefs that have been observed for generations are still being implemented today. One of these core beliefs is the idea that the body and mind are “two but not two,” meaning that both the body and mind combined together create a singular

experience. Our lama further explained that meditation helps create the ideal state of zen by unifying the body and mind. In addition, ayurvedic medicine is still commonly practiced in Spiti. Ayurvedic medicine, or ayurveda, is one of the world's most ancient medical systems, having been developed over 3,000 ago. It follows a holistic approach, functioning under the idea that an individual's physical, mental, and spiritual existences are delicately balanced with one another and that each one has a significant impact on one's health. It was then that I made a stunning realization. Osteopathic medicine has been practiced for thousands of years, just under a different guise. The core principles of Buddhism and ayurveda exactly mirror the tenets of osteopathic medicine. After coming upon this realization, I was determined to redeem myself and put everything I learned on this trip to the test.

On one of the last days of clinic, my time of reckoning came. A 63-year old male, who actually was not even originally my patient, came in for chronic back pain and because of this, experienced decreased thoracic mobility. He had worked as a farmer his entire life, performing hard labor to provide for his family year after year, to the point of hurting his back. The plan was to discharge him with a one-week supply of Ibuprofen and to advise him to not exert himself so much while working. Then, one of my peers asked for my opinion of this treatment. In my head, the medicine was only a temporary fix and his pain would simply come back again. I volunteered to perform some OMM, in the hopes it would provide some relief and treatment. I diagnosed him and performed thoracic muscle energy, like I had been taught during my first year. What happened afterwards felt like magic. He stated he had felt less pain and had regained motion in his back, which he had not had for years. While I was teaching him the procedure so that he could replicate it again at home, I could not help but think about how much I took away from learning osteopathic medicine. Osteopathy provided me an insight nobody else in my company had.

By the end of the expedition, I felt like I was able to represent myself, my school, my state, and my profession with pride. By that point, the titles of MD/DO meant nothing. We were all just people striving for one common goal: to care for those who are not able to get help and share knowledge with those who can benefit from it. I could not help but think this could be a goal I could work towards for the rest of my life. It was not until I wrote this essay that I realized that everything I set out to find was right in front of me the entire time and that it took a trip across the world to see it. I did not realize it at the time, but I had been infected with a bug of my own. Within those 3 weeks, I developed a newfound admiration for osteopathic medicine and a brand new passion for global medicine that has completely captured my heart and soul. I realized that the four core tenets our profession is based on are neither new, nor radical. These principles have been observed by generations of families across the globe for hundreds of years, before there were any MDs or DOs. I had finally understood the importance of BCOM's mission "Para la gente y el futuro." We as physicians do not just have a moral obligation to care for the people and the future in our communities. In order to truly make a lasting impact, we must care for the people and future on a global scale. I had finally found my new purpose, which is to use and promote osteopathic medicine in the realm of global health.