



EPMG GOES TO THE JUNGLE

I have performed emergency medicine in the military for over 25 years. I have been in various countries throughout the world, been on the front lines of battle, provided medicine in the most austere of environments. Despite my previous exploits, I had never provided medicine on the front lines of poverty and tropical disease. April of 2017 changed all of that. Through a mutual friend, my dentist, I was invited by RiverWind, a non-profit Christian missionary group, to participate in a civilian medical mission. I was enlisted as the sole medical provider to perform civilian medicine in a country that I have never been to, to a group of indigenous peoples I had never heard of, in the middle of the Amazon jungle. Nothing could have prepared me for the adventure to follow.

Two months later, after successfully (however reluctantly) recruiting the help of my wife, Rachel, and youngest son, Gavin, we began to make the plans. It took almost an entire year of preparation, planning, securing medications, and packing supplies to ensure our success. On May 11, 2018, my family and I (along with eight large suitcases filled with medical supplies) boarded an airplane headed for Pucallpa, Peru, the launch pad for our medical mission. After many hours of riding in planes, vans, boats, and “moto-taxi’s,” we arrived in the village of Nueva Italia, located in the Ucayali region of Peru. This area of the jungle was populated in the early 1900’s by businesses willing to take advantage of the Amazonian timber boom and exploit the area for profit. Small jungle cities and villages were hastily created. After World War II, all timber and rubber manufacturing slowed significantly, the villages and cities decreased in size and profit. Poverty and sickness soon took over.

May 12, 2018, we, along with Pastor Douglas Cuthbert of Sister Lakes Community Church, arrived by float plane in the remote village of Nueva Italia. It is situated along the banks of the Ucayali river, deep within the Amazon Jungle. Pastor Doug was there to provide spiritual ministry and counseling to the people of this often-forgotten area.

Twenty minutes later, after a short mission brief, quick hello, and a light snack, we were swiftly ushered to a converted community building, which would act as our clinic for the next 5 days. Upon entering the building, it was impossible to ignore the multitudes of people sitting on old wooden benches waiting to be seen. Many of the patients had already been waiting for 4 hours or more. With no electricity and no running water, we had to alter our perspective on what it meant to deliver quality medical care. We hit the ground running, setting up the items we would need to see patients and distribute medicines. My wife and 15-year-old son ran the “pharmacy,” as I tended to the needs of the patients. Later we would find out that many of the patients had been walking for days, from surrounding villages, to get to Nueva Italia, where we were holding clinic.



Many types of patients were seen. Case presentations ranged anywhere from the common cold, childhood rashes, and hypertension, to fungal foot infections, and even a piranha bite. Perhaps the greatest number of patients required treatment for intestinal parasitic infections (IPI). There were an extreme number of individuals, of all ages, that presented with the gastro-intestinal complaints of abdominal cramping, bloody diarrhea, loss of appetite, weight loss, fever, and dehydration. Given the unsanitary conditions in which these villagers lived, cooked, and played, it is no surprise that the majority of patients suffered from IPI's.

For the majority, there is only one source of water, the Ucayali river. They use it for transportation, bathing, cooking, drinking, and all too often, disposal of human waste. It is not uncommon to see children defecating directly into or near the river bank. With each patient seen, we tried desperately to educate them on the importance of boiling the river water before drinking it. Unfortunately, this has been the way of life for so long, that people are resistant to change.



After a long, hot day of seeing patients, we would adjourn back to the mission compound where we would be fed like kings. We would enjoy homemade food prepared by hired locals, also members of the missionary team. And almost every meal was accompanied by some variant of the potato. An interesting factoid; there are over 4,000 potato species that originated from Peru. After feeding, we fell into our beds at the local “hotel.” The rooms were small, about the size of a walk-in closet. My wife and I shared a single bed, had no air conditioning, and no hot water. Although, given the extreme heat, we were happy to have the cold shower (even if it was a trickle) and a flushable toilet. Prior to falling asleep each night, we were serenaded by the calls and cacklings of the resident rooster. At around 0500 AM, the next morning, we were awakened to the sound of the same rooster bellowing his morning standard of noisy calls and cackles outside our window. Not without mention, it seemed that the neighborhood dogs knew we were trying to sleep as well. Each evening, after the rooster made his announcements, four or five dogs would begin to bark and howl in unison.



On day four, we packed up some medical supplies and headed up-river to another remote village eager for medical care. Our transport was an old skinny wooden canoe, about 30 foot long, with an engine that could only be described as, “a diesel powered lawn mower connected to a long propeller.” The boat was called a “peke-peke”, because of the sound made by its engine as it slowly wormed its way against the current. One-way, the trip was 6-hours long, on a small boat with single row plastic lawn chair seating and an overhead tarp, that covered only half of us from the harsh rays of the sun. To my wife’s chagrin, there was no possibility of a bathroom break or rest stop. It was definitely a grin and bare it type of situation.



When we finally arrived at the village of “Alto Aruya,” we quickly set-up and began seeing patients. In the short time we were there, we were able to see approximately 40 patients before heading back home down river. In addition to the usual intestinal parasitic infections, we treated patients for lice, scabies, malnutrition, prenatal counseling and other more common ailments. In the end, we left them with a much-needed supply of pre-natal vitamins, children’s vitamins, and Ibuprofen. The things we so often take for granted, in our home medicine cabinets, were treated as precious commodities in these small communities.

After seeing 230 patients (as well as treating some members of our team) in four days, it is no surprise that a few of them left an indelible mark on our hearts. On day 1 an older gentleman was brought in on a pallet of blankets, carried by several of his family members. After performing a physical examination and reviewing his condition, I had determined that he was afflicted with multiple cancerous tumors. Unfortunately, he had no prior medical care before today. Given the acuity of his condition, the remoteness of our location, a lack of medical resources, and inability to readily travel, his prognosis was grim. I was tasked with informing his family that his illness was terminal. My only course of action was to attempt to ease some of his nausea and pain. Although I could not do more, he was able to return home that day and be more comfortable. The missionary along with the local pastor, had the opportunity to minister to he and his family shortly after his visit to the clinic. We were informed that he passed away within the coming week.



On day 2, a four-month old girl was brought in by her grandmother for fever and lack of appetite. She was severely dehydrated, lethargic, febrile, and refused to eat. Her hair was falling out in clumps and was sticking to her skin, which had a grey hue. The child was ailing from an assortment of serious conditions; malnutrition, pneumonia, dehydration, and a possible intestinal parasitic infection. She was literally days away from death. Through our interpreters, I was able to assess her needs, administer medications, and instruct the grandmother in medication delivery and oral rehydration. With the help of a home visit from our RiverWind missionaries, she was able to receive the medications and care that she so desperately needed.



On day 5 she returned to us for a follow-up, looking strong and filling her lungs with loud cries of delight; which were met with much joy and happiness. The fever had broken, her hair was staying intact, she was pink, and showed great signs of re-hydration. Her mother was even able to resume breast feeding as normal. What a wonderful blessing it was to hear her strong cries as I re-assessed her condition. She will always be in my heart, reminding me of the value of life. Despite our skin, our religion, or our status, we are all alike... We live, we love, we care.



During our visit up river to the village of Alto Aruya, we cared for an elderly woman, covered in lice and scabies. I have never seen an infestation so severe or extreme. The tiny bugs were clearly visible as they crawled about her head and shoulders and small flying gnats were circling above. She was clearly the outcast of the village. Being sure to stay at a safe distance from others, she snuck in the doorway as our very last patient, after the masses had left. We were able to dispense several delousing solutions, including shampoo and oral medications for itching and infestation. We can only hope that she was able to follow all directions and rid herself of these parasites, as well as combat future re-infestation.

Overall, we cared for peoples from over 18 different villages. On the closing of our last day in Nueva Italia, the mayor of the town came to extend his gratitude for our hard work and caring. Since our return to the United States, we've learned that another village has asked for a medical mission visit. We hope to garner enough support and form a team of willing volunteers to return again in 2019....Lord willing. To all of you that supported us on this trip, "Thank you all! You have helped make a difference in the world, no matter how small. Because after all, big things come in little packages..."



