Stories from the Field
The University of Texas School of Public Health
Student Practicum Experiences
Fall 2014 – Dual Degree
The practicum experience is an integral part of the MPH and DrPH curricula. Public health students are provided with the opportunity to apply their classroom knowledge to real world settings through which they make a meaningful contribution to a public health organization.

Under the guidance of a community preceptor and faculty sponsor, students from all divisions gain a deeper understanding of public health practice, interact with professionals in the field, and expand their repertoire of professional skills.

This fifteenth-edition e-magazine showcases student practicum experiences throughout the Fall 2014 semester. (Prior semesters may be accessed through the e-book, a collection of student abstracts and e-magazines describing their experiences.)
Practicum Topics

Serving Size: 1 Practicum per Student
Servings per e-Magazine: 10

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Dual Degree

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Improving Refugee Health

Practicum Highlights

- Helped develop a healthcare orientation workshop for newly-arrived refugees.
- Implemented a healthcare orientation workshop tailored to specific refugee subpopulations.
- Assisted in the creation of a medical resource “guidebook” for refugee case managers to reference.
- Worked with refugee case managers to connect clients with medical resources in the community.

Lessons Learned

- Set clear goals for yourself as well as a realistic timeline in which to complete them.
- Consistent, clear communication is an invaluable asset.
- No matter how carefully a project is planned, inevitably a complication will arise, so be prepared to problem solve!
- Capitalize on every opportunity to improve the lives of others!

Improving Refugee Health by Increasing Healthcare Access and Literacy

By: Danika Brodak

In the fall of 2014 I had the pleasure of interning with the Refugee Services of Texas (RST)-Houston. My main objectives were to help increase refugees’ access to available healthcare resources and to assist in improving refugees’ knowledge of general health topics and the US healthcare system.

To accomplish these objectives, I researched Houston area resources that were specialized in treating particular health needs. I then worked with case managers to help connect refugees with these resources. I was also involved with the Medical Case Management Working Group, which is comprised of members from all of the refugee resettlement agencies in Houston. This group is invested in improving refugee access to healthcare. Here, I primarily helped to create a resource “guidebook” for case managers to reference in order to link refugees with services for commonly-encountered medical situations. Lastly, I helped to develop a healthcare orientation workshop focused on improving refugees’ health and healthcare literacy.

By the end of my practicum, the first draft of the resource “guidebook” is almost complete and the healthcare orientation workshop was successfully piloted in Iraqi and Cuban groups with promising results!

Public Health Significance

My practicum experience most closely fulfills the Essential Services of Public Health (PHES) focused on informing, educating, and empowering people about health and linking people to needed health services.

For instance, the healthcare orientation workshop has served to inform and educate refugees about health, the healthcare system, and available community resources, thus enabling and empowering them to improve their health. Likewise, by individually working with refugees, I have been able to assist in linking them with services tailored to their health needs.

Another PHES that RST implements is mobilizing community partnerships to identify and solve health problems. One example of how this is accomplished is through the development of a Medical Case Management Working Group which includes members from all of the refugee resettlement agencies in Houston. The Working Group conducts monthly meetings to identify problems related to refugee access to healthcare and collaborates to brainstorm solutions.
You don’t have to cross the border to find a community in need
By: Andrew Billnitzer

As part of my practicum experience I worked with fellow classmates at my medical school to discover the needs and resources in nearby communities in El Paso Texas.

We traveled to Montana Vista, a small community several miles out of town and conducted various interviews with local leaders as well as conducted our own survey of community resources.

Public Health Significance

Through this survey we were able to identify those barriers to the health within the Montana Vista Community. Citizens in Montana Vista live far from the City of El Paso where they may be seen more readily for their health problems. The community also lacks those resources such as paved roads and healthy food options, which discourages practicing exercise and health diet.

As medical students in at the Paul L Foster School of Medicine in El Paso we have presented this information to our peers and faculty physicians in hopes that the local health care system is able to recognize these barriers in both Montana Vista and in their own patients. Armed with this information we can encourage physician volunteers to visit the community, engage in health classes at the community center, and advocate for community improvements that would break down these barriers.

Special events/ duties during your practicum

- Conducted Windshield Survey of Montana Vista in El Paso County
- Conducted multiple interviews with various community leaders including local ministers, Public Workers, and Judges
- Conducted multiple interviews with various community leaders including local ministers, Public Workers, and Judges

Lessons Learned

- Issues such as clean water, poverty, and developed communities are not unique to other countries, but can be found here in America.
- Identifying potential resources is key to improving community wellbeing.
A Look into Fabens Community Healthcare System

By: Ashley Chapel

The main goal of this opportunity was to look into the Fabens community and better understand their public health concerns.

We went into the Fabens community and interviewed several members from the school district, the community center, the housing shelter and several people on the streets.

My main role was interviewer/translator.

Most of the community speaks Spanish, therefore it was essential that we had a translator. Furthermore, the community felt more comfortable speaking with someone in their native language.

Overall, we discovered that the community of Fabens is severely lacking in pediatric care as well as dental. New clinics have been opening up, but there is still a lack of basic needs for children.

Public Health Significance

The public health essential service that relates most closely with this project is “Monitor health status to identify and solve community health problems”.

The goal of this project was to identify specific community health concerns and potentially formulate a plan to improve them.

This is significant from a public health perspective because our project incorporated multiple agencies in the community who were willing to work with us to understand more about the community.

While the current project was merely an assessment, a future project could be created to target the specific problems and create a solution. The end hope would be to use our knowledge of the lack of healthcare in Fabens to create a functional welfare system.

Future Students

Advice for future students in practicum would be simply to enjoy the experience and obtain as much information as possible regarding your public health program to enhance your future work.

La Isla Cemetery in Fabens, Texas.
Community Needs Assessment of Chaparral, NM

The Needs of Chaparral, NM

By: Zinmar Ma

Chaparral is a rural, unincorporated commuter town in Dona Ana and Otero counties in New Mexico.

We performed a windshield and walking survey by examining living conditions, talking to some of the residents, and interviewing key people in the community. We interviewed people from the sheriff's department, the public health office, the community center, Chaparral high school, and the local chapter of the Sister of Assumption.

Problems that exist in this community include extreme poverty from lack of jobs, inadequate health care for many people, high teen pregnancy rate, and high drug use rate. Being unincorporated has resulted in a lack of funding for paved roads, sewage systems, better health and education services, and adequate law enforcement.

Public Health Significance

Windshield and walking surveys are an important aspect of the initial assessment of a community. These surveys can help public health officials understand what the biggest needs of the community and what assets the community has. The surveys are an easy and quick way to gain an objective overview of the community and a chance to build rapport with members of the community who can later participate in community-based participatory action research or in the implementation of community programs.

Obstacles to better healthcare in the Chaparral community include a lack of large supermarket chains where people could get healthy produce options inexpensively, the presence of many abandoned dogs that make residents hesitate to play outside or walk on the roads, and a lack of paved roads that causes asthma exacerbations.

Lack of Healthcare:

- No hospitals or emergency department: must go to El Paso or Las Cruces.
- There are only 4 clinics.
- There is only 1 dentist.
- No psychiatrist or psychologist.
- There is only 1 ambulance.

The Drug Problem

- Inadequate law enforcement.
- Not many other recreational activity choices for teenagers.
- Mobile meth labs are prevalent.
- Marijuana: possession of under 4 ounces is considered petty and is of no consequence.
Society, Community and the Individual: Understanding Border Health of El Paso

Facing Health Disparities of the Fabens’s Community

By: Anand Narayanan

The Society, Community and the Individual is a course at the Paul L Foster SOM that gives medical students the opportunity to explore the community that they live in. The program is run by Dr. Theresa Byrd. During the course we had the opportunity to travel to different communities in the area such as Fabens, Socorro and others to see the disparities and assess the standard of living. We were also taught the fundamentals of epidemiology, environmental health, health policy and management.

My group conducted our project at Fabens where we assessed the living standards by visiting schools, the housing projects, parks and recreational facilities, local businesses (i.e. restaurants, grocery stores) and available medical care. Fabens ranked as one of the lowest out of all the major communities due to low funding by the government.

Public Health Significance

I think our role in the community addressed two important essential services of public health. The first was our role in monitoring the health status to identify community health problems. This was achieved through our partnership with the local Fabens community clinics and the Texas Tech Physicians of El Paso group. We were able to track increased incidence of disease (i.e. increases in TB). The other essential role that we addressed was to inform educate and empower people about health issue. The fact that we were medical students in the area was very comforting to the people of Fabens. We taught them about preventative care and basic wound care.

Through the SCI program we get involved with local community projects including a student run clinic that was recently set up by our school near Socorro. We also conduct research projects that look at how border culture influences disease outcome.

Lessons Learned [OR] Advice for Future Students

• Be respectful of the lifestyle that these people live and listen to their stories because there is so much history and struggle that often goes unnoticed.

Special events/duties during your practicum

• Having the opportunity to share a traditional Mexican meal with the locals
• Visiting the legendary rooster of the Fabens’s community
Border Health in the El Paso, Texas area

By: Victoria Nunez

Our project was a basic community assessment of the city of Clint, Texas that is located in Far East El Paso County.

We were a group of 8 people as part of our Society, Community and the Individual (SCI) summer immersion program prior to starting regular classes of medical school that went out into the community to interview residents of Clint.

Public Health Significance

Clint, Texas is a smaller community within El Paso County with a population of 980 people. Many of Clint’s residents suffer from lack of insurance or lack of access to healthcare like many other residents of El Paso, County. Many of the major medical facilities are located closer to the more populous area of El Paso, about 30 minutes away.

The demographics of the population in Clint is similar to that of El Paso in that most of the inhabitants of Hispanic and Spanish speaking. Many families work by working in the nearby cotton or animal farms.

Public health is a major concern of Clint officials especially for their youth. Many resources are geared towards providing after school activities and summer camps to keep children active and healthy. The police chief was happy to report minimal youth crime and gang activity.

Overall, Clint is reflective of El Paso in many ways with access to healthcare and lack of insurance being the major issue.

Lessons Learned

• Take some time to learn directly from those living in the community you are studying
• Cultural differences impact health care and public health approaches
Border Health in El Paso, TX
By: Chetna Pande

Public Health Significance
The public health instruction, shadowing, and community assessment of NE El Paso, addressed the public health essential service of “Diagnosing and investigating health problems and health hazards in the community.” By first driving through the area and conducting an assessment of the community, we were able to evaluate the needs of the community. Then, by interviewing community leaders, we learned about problems the community faces from location, but learned about the important services provided.

Exposure to such organizations through my instruction helped me see needs and encouraged me to get involved in my community.

It is through the school and SCI that I have learned more about the health needs of El Paso and how to most effectively address them.

Students expanding knowledge and understanding of El Paso through a windshield survey
As part of the Paul L Foster School of Medicine in El Paso curriculum, students take a course called “Society, Community, and the Individual” (SCI). Through it, we are immersed in El Paso, both the city and the culture, in order to gain a greater appreciation for the city we serve. Specifically, we learned about behavioral sciences, epidemiology, statistics, alternative medicine and community advocacy.

These skills helped us gain a more holistic understanding of medicine. The knowledge I gained through the course complemented my MPH instruction well.

Conducting a windshield survey, or a community assessment, allowed me to gain exposure to community needs. We drove around NE El Paso and visited a number of local community sites in the area, and we interviewed leaders of the community to gain a sense of the culture and needs of the area.

Lessons Learned
Conducting a windshield survey in a remote area of El Paso through the SCI course improved my depth of understanding on the city, fostered an understanding of the towns peoples’ needs, developed a sense of empathy towards their social needs, and allowed for sharing of knowledge to
El Paso is located next to Juarez, Mexico where they form a binational metropolitan area. Fort Bliss is a major positive economic influence for northeast El Paso and home to the William Beaumont Army Medical Center.


Public Health Significance

Society, Community, and the Individual (SCI) is a two year long learning experience integrated into the Paul L. Foster School of Medicine curriculum designed to expose medical students to population health, public health, the community, and the delivery of health care in the community of a border town. We were able to evaluate the effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of personal and population-based health services through a variety of field experiences and exercises, including the Windshield and Walking Survey’s highlighted here.

Lessons Learned

- Be respectful and sensitive about cultural differences
- Try and learn the language of the people you serve
- Get to know your community by volunteering
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your community

Texas-Mexico Border Health in El Paso

By: Leigha Sharp

On what public health issue/topic did you work?
Public access to healthcare in the border town of El Paso, Texas. Specifically in the northeast area where Fort Bliss is located.

What approach was taken by your host organization to address this issue?
Windshield and Walking Surveys

What was the final product you created for your practicum site?
The final project included a power point and class presentation.

What were the major findings or results?
El Paso’s main advantage to serving the community is the use of promotoras who are lay Hispanic community members who receive specialized training to provide basic health education in this diverse community.

Some disadvantages to public health in El Paso include:
- Lack of funding
- Lack of specialists including psychiatrists which is detrimental to the mental health of a military town
- Low income and low education level of residents
- Pervasive hypertension and type II diabetes

Highlights

- Two years of integrated learning experiences
- Exploring access to healthcare in northeast El Paso through Windshield and Walking Surveys

Project Vida is a community health non-profit organization that is a federally qualified health care center. They provide general care, dental and other health services for 3,500 patients in the Northeast El Paso community.

Image: Personally taken
Fostering Community Health at the US-Mexico Border

By: Maria Sheikh

I am one of several medical students in my class who are pursuing a dual MD/MPH degree through Texas Tech University Paul L. Foster School of Medicine/University of Texas School of Public Health. We began our careers with cultural immersion in a course called “Society, Community, and the Individual”. It gave us the opportunity to work with local physicians and health care workers that advocate preventative care for the border population. Though these clinics do provide medical treatments, there is a strong emphasis on public health measures.

We also conducted a windshield survey for local communities - my group did one for Anthony, Texas to assess the community’s particular needs.

Public Health Significance

My practicum experience shadowing in clinics and at the El Paso Dept. of Public Health most closely met the Essential Public Health service goal of “Inform, educate, and empower people about health issues.”

It is easy to fall into the routine of a “problem then solution” approach, especially when one is becoming a physician. But using a “solution before problem” approach by preventative measures has far more advantages. Furthermore, our windshield survey of Anthony, Texas met the goal of “Diagnosing and investigating health problems and health hazards in the community.” We noted community boundaries, availability of health and grocery stores, presence of schools, zoning, and locations of businesses and religious institutions. I thoroughly enjoyed conducting this type of survey as it opened my eyes to health beyond what we see in the clinic, and I plan to incorporate that into my future practice.
Heart Health in Elementary School Children

By: Sarah Slief

In participation with seeds of change, a partnership between Paul Foster School of Medicine and Clardy Elementary School in El Paso, TX, I helped to host a class in the lab at Paul Foster over heart health.

We discussed basic anatomy and physiology of the heart and blood, pulses, where they can be found and how to calculate beats per minute. Then we did a brief exercise and re-calculated our pulse and discussed the meaning of increased heart rate and the impact of exercise on not just your heart, but your health. The children were able to fill out worksheets and take them home to practice.

This was an important topic to teach this group of children. Childhood obesity is an increasing issue especially in the El Paso area, and this targeted an at risk population and may set a precedent for teaching more children in the future. This also helps to peak their interest in health and science at a young age.

Public Health Significance

The Public Health Essential Service(s) (PHES) that most closely relates to my practicum experience is “inform, educate, and empower people about health issues” and “mobilize community partnerships and action to identify and solve health problems”.

The program “Seeds of Change” works with an elementary school to help encourage kids to have an interest in science, and it also is an avenue to educate kids about how to stay healthy.

Advice for Future Practicum Students

• Time management is key, would limit the information taught in the class to the key points.

Heart Health in Children

Practicum Highlights

• Teaching elementary school children about heart health
• We discussed how exercise increases your heart rate, and keeps your body healthy
For more information regarding
The University of Texas School of Public Health,
Office of Public Health Practice
and the practicum program, please visit:
https://sph.uth.tmc.edu/practicum/