

Chairs' Corner – February 2012
Pharmacists without Borders

TO: UW Foundation, Deans/Chancellors, University Advancement Staff

FROM: Lyn Grinstein, Chair, UW Foundation
Howard Behar, Vice Chair, UW Foundation
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Dear Friends,

Jenny Arnold, a 2006 alumna of the UW PharmD program, now works for the Washington State Pharmacy Association. She is officially the Director of Pharmacy Practice Development. What does that mean? “Well,” she says, “I tell my mother it means finding new and creative ways for pharmacists to take over the world.”

Of course that’s a joke—mostly. But in fact, while the rest of us weren’t paying attention, the practice and goals of pharmacy have enlarged significantly in the last several years. The UW School of Pharmacy, and hence the State of Washington, have been leaders in this change. Did you get your flu shot at your local pharmacy this year? You can thank pharmacy professor Don Downing and a former colleague, who spearheaded the effort, in the 1990s, to train and certify Washington pharmacists to administer vaccines. This is now standard practice all over the country.

Last September, 29 PharmD students—about a third of the second-year class—spent a week in rural Honduras providing medical care for some 800 people. This is a story worth telling in itself, but also as a look at new possibilities for health care.

The trip began with an encounter between two ambitious young women from immigrant families: Faaiza Alibhai, from Bellingham, and Denise Ngo, from Tacoma. Both had changed career plans as UW undergraduates and then spent time fulfilling the demanding prerequisites of the PharmD program (from organic chemistry to microeconomics to public speaking and beyond).

As new friends in the program, they discovered that both had been to Honduras on trips sponsored by Global Medical Brigades, part of an international organization that takes volunteers to poor communities. The two had a common impulse: let’s go back to Honduras with a group of pharmacy students, now that we know so much more about what to do.

Working with the Brigades, and finding time around the edges of their classwork, they spent nine intense months putting the trip together: recruiting fellow students and health-care providers from the UW and the community, raising funds (notably \$8,000 from an auction), gathering donated medications, designing a class (including rudimentary Spanish) to prepare students for the experience. “The whole school helped,” says Denise, “and the project grew exponentially, beyond our expectations.”

In the end, they arrived in the village of Joya Grande with 29 pharmacy students, 5 pharmacists (including Jenny Arnold and Don Downing), 2 physicians, a nurse, a nurse practitioner, and a physical therapist. Most, but not all, had UW connections. They also arrived with some 45 suitcases of medications—“the most the Brigades people had ever seen,” says Faaiza. The Brigades provided some translators, and 3 Honduran health practitioners completed the team. They set up shop in the village school.

And there, Don Downing proposed a new approach: let the physicians concentrate on diagnosis, and let the pharmacy people take it from there—making decisions about treatment, prescribing medications they knew were actually on hand, educating patients. “We came up with a new way to do the job,” says Professor Downing. “Everybody bought in—it freed up doctors to spend more time in diagnosis, and increased efficiency dramatically.” In a place where hundreds of people line up for medical care, many walking miles to get there, efficiency is a valuable asset.

At least as valuable was what this approach taught the UW pharmacy students. With the licensed pharmacists serving as preceptors, the students consulted manuals, drew upon all they had learned in the classroom, considered the particular lives and needs of these patients, and created a treatment plan to address each diagnosis. The preceptors questioned every decision, pushed each student to get it right. “We had to justify everything,” says Denise. “The learning curve was extremely steep. But learning in a place like that means you’ll remember it forever.”

Jenny Arnold, just a few years out of school herself, was rooting for the students. “They hadn’t had a chance before,” she says, “to think and act as pharmacists—to learn and understand their role in the whole system. This was an ideal environment for seeing that, and for seeing how pharmacists might be able to expand primary care. About 80 percent of all diagnosed conditions are treated with medications—and pharmacists are the experts on medicines. I watched the students grow and flourish and get it.”

The trip had its frustrations. It was clear to everyone that one week could not change the world of Joya Grande, where there is no regular access to health care and medications, where people are poor and systems we take for granted are non-existent. Even with visits every three or four months from the Medical Brigades, even with the medical records the Brigades have started keeping, says Professor Downing, “You’re really not managing the very high burden of chronic illnesses.” Denise cannot forget a little girl whose father had been murdered and who needed care they could not give: “She said, ‘My heart hurts.’”

Still, says Don Downing, “We really made a lot of good things happen.” At least one life was saved that week, possibly two. People with acute illnesses were treated and got better. Children learned to wash their hands and brush their teeth. Education was part of everything, so that people could learn how to keep themselves healthy and how to recognize a real emergency.

Memories of the people themselves, as much as the lessons learned, will stay with those who went to Joya Grande. “These people walked all day to see us, miles and miles, and they were smiling,” says Faaiza. “They were so welcoming, so happy to see us, so patient.”

Don Downing, too, says he cherishes “the look on the faces of those patients.” But as a veteran of global travel on behalf of better health-care systems, he also cherishes a metaphor he saw in action at Joya Grande: “Good health care takes a village of health-care providers. It takes everybody collaborating, at the top of their skill level.” That’s what he aimed to create on the trip, by elevating his pharmacy students to real membership on the medical team. And, with primary-care resources in this country becoming more and more strained, that’s what he’s working for here: a recognition that pharmacists can and must do more than was expected of them in the past.

Next time you get your flu shot in the corner drug store, look around and see what else might be going on there.

Lyn, Howard, and Dan

Researched and written by Joyce Brewster