Inside Information

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MSU COLLEGE OF HUMAN MEDICINE STUDENT LUKE FISCHER, REFERRING TO A RECENT TRIP TO CUBA

MSU College of Human Medicine MD/PhD candidate, Luke Fischer, shares a toy and a smile with a toy in a pediatric hospital on a recent trip to Cuba with First-Hand Aid. (Submitted by Gina Nardol)

MSU COLLEGE OF HUMAN MEDICINE

Trip offers rare access to Cuban health system

Luke Fischer concedes he was a little nervous when he first proposed a trip to Cuba for himself and nine other Michigan State University College of Human Medicine students. He and his father, Dr. William Telford, a Grand Rapids anesthesiologist, had traveled to Cuba in 2009 with First-Hand Aid, a Grand Rapids charity that delivers medical supplies to hospitals and clinics in Cuba.

But Fischer envisioned a different kind of trip for himself and the other medical students. In addition to delivering the supplies, he wanted to make hospital rounds with the Cuban doctors, meet with Cuban medical students, and get a first-hand look at how their healthcare system and education compare with those in this country.

But would the Cuban government grant that kind of close access? Although he knew this “was a different kind of neighborhood for the organization, taking medical students,” Fischer approached First-Hand Aid founder Marc Bobland with the idea. Bobland had similar reservations.

Since founding First-Hand Aid in 2000, he had made 80-some trips to Cuba, but never had he requested, nor had the Cuban government granted, the kind of access Fischer wanted.

“I was actually very skeptical and nervous about it,” Bobland said. “I knew if we were going to do this right, we’d have to have the access that we needed.

“Still, I thought it was a great idea,” he said, “so we forged on.”

On March 7, they left for Cuba. In addition to Bobland and the 10 students, the group included Telford and two other Grand Rapids physicians, Dr. Jason Umfoot and Dr. David Burnette, all College of Human Medicine clinical faculty members. After they returned a week later, Fischer and Bobland pronounced the trip a success.

“We were more than satisfied,” Fischer said.

It was “wonderful,” Bobland said, “beyond my expectations.”

The students made rounds with doctors in an oncology hospital in Havana.

They sat at the bedside of children in a pediatric hospital and gave them candy and toys.

They met with students at the International Latin American School of Medicine near Havana, which offers free education to students from countries worldwide, with no expectations, other than that they return home and practice medicine.

The courses the students were studying in Cuba were comparable to what he and his College of Human Medicine classmates are taking, Fischer said. Forty-five minutes from Havana, the students visited a hospital for a look at how rural medicine is delivered.

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“I feel they would have ride a horse, they do,” Bobland said. “If they need to walk 10 miles, they do.”

Fischer said he was impressed with the quality of medical care, despite a lack of the latest high-tech equipment, or even enough low-tech devices, such as stethoscopes.

Each student brought a stethoscope, paid for by Telford and the College of Human Medicine, to give to students and medical providers.

Fischer said. “Those were some very emotional moments,” Bobland said. “It was a great project.”

For the College of Human Medicine students, the lesson was “you love the bruises, you have the hands,” Bobland said. “I want to show you medicine by the heart.”

By American standards, the hospital was of a 1960s vintage, with many patients sharing wards, rather than in private rooms.

With the lack of CAT scans, MRIs and other equipment — in part due to the decades-long U.S. embargo — the Cuban physicians relied more on their clinical skills, examining patients and spending more time with them, a lesson the College of Human Medicine also emphasized.

“What the Cuban physicians are excellent at — and Cubans in general — is being resourceful,” Fischer said. They were made aware of what they have, he said, and “the patients were really satisfied with the care they were receiving.”

Margo Smith, the College of Human Medicine’s director of Service Learning and Global Health, who accompanied the students, was equally impressed.

“We all went in there with our assumptions of what Cuba was like,” she said. “Some of those assumptions were proven to not be true. Despite the lack of resources, the patients seemed to be getting really good care.”

Smith said she plans to ask the university’s Office of Study Abroad to approve an annual trip to Cuba, in addition to the service learning projects the college already has in Peru and Costa Rica.

Fischer, a dual-degree candidate working on an M.D. degree and a Ph.D. in neuroscience, a program supported by Spectrum Health, had a similar goal when he proposed the trip.

“I hate doing things that disappoint,” he said. “To be able to build that relationship between the College of Human Medicine and First-Hand Aid is very important to me. It’s about creating something that will last.”