

The hour is 4:30 a.m. and it marks another day of rounds in the Department (sub-division) of Copán. The sun has not yet risen and if it did, the clouds overhead would coat the land in shades of grey. Even with this weather that threatens rain, a woman climbs down a mountain. She is the only representative of Florida's health care system; usually bringing medicine and other necessities to the community, but today she will be our guide. (It is important to note that Florida has been an area dominated by drug-dealing, violence and poverty. Its location makes it a strategic point for illegal activity to thrive.)

The mayor's instructions are clear: we are to go with someone who knows the area well and preferably had been born there but who also carries the CAMO's logo. Who better suited to the task than Doña Rosa, the nurse who, for 27 years, has been in charge of the health of these mountain villages?

At 6 a.m. we meet with Doña Rosa, a woman of sixty years. Bright and charismatic, she asks us if we are prepared to mountain climb. With a laugh, I respond, "This is what we have been doing these last few months."

I show her my patient list and looking over them rapidly, she tells me everyone on it had died. She reaches the end of this list and with a different look on her face, she says, "Surely we will not finish today." She takes her cell phone and calls two Community Chiefs to ask them to open the gates. I don't ask her about her odd behavior, as I am eager to begin our search.

We begin our search for ten patients in Sierra del Espíritu Santo, down a dirt road that was actually quite flat which is a rarity in the region. Our guide Rosa explains that this road was created by the leaders of Mafia, now in prison in the US. The impression of a good road ends a few minutes later when we reach a part filled with stones and rocks. We stop the car briefly and then slow to a crawl to add traction. The barely-above 10 km/hour pace is agonizing as the first community we are to visit is two hours away. It is interesting to see the weather change as we get closer to our destination. I verify on my GPS Florida's location and in less than two hours, we climb to an altitude of 1750 meters.

We begin our search for the first patient in a home that was scarcely more than a single room. This is a common theme in these zones of Honduras in which there are no rooms, only one space where families eat, cook and spend time together. In the home we gather in, the grandfather, father, children and possibly grandchildren live together in a space no more than 5 x 5 meters. I introduce myself to the residents of the home. They are clearly excited to see a doctor in their home, considering that this is a rarity for their village. They offer me coffee and a tortilla with beans as I explain to them the reason for my visit: the DaVita survey which aims to gather information on patients' gastric cancer diagnosis and treatment. They agree to participate, even though it means remembering the difficult moments following Doña Glenda's diagnosis on January, 1 2016.

This day, they are happy to know there are still those who care about this woman who was their wife, their mother and their grandmother. With tears in their eyes, they explain how difficult it had been to take her to the hospital in Santa Rosa of Copán. How this woman, four months prior to her death, had travelled down a mountain seeking treatment. Immediately, the rocky and uncertain terrain I had just travelled over by car and the two long hours it took to get here comes to mind.

They tell me that a doctor informed them that Doña Glenda's cancer had reached metastasis and that it was no longer possible to offer any treatments. They could only ease her death and he prescribed Ranitidina for this purpose. When the time comes to ask about medical treatment, her eldest daughter Cosmo tells us that doctor charged \$400 for some curative teas the family insists kept her alive a little longer.

At the end of our survey, we ask about the characteristics of their abode. They do not have plumbing for a bathroom, the walls are made of wood and the floor of dirt. I am both saddened and surprised that this family

had paid so much money and as I left, the image of this grandmother climbing down a mountain to find a hospital is still in my mind.

I continue my search for patients and family members. We travel all day. Two places we can clearly see but they take hours to actually get to. At sunset we arrive at a gate almost in the middle of the jungle.

Here our guide Doña Rosa says, “We have to open this gate.”

I of course ask, “Where does it lead?”

“This gate is Guatemala. We have to cross it to get to Don Mario’s village.” There is no way to get to the village through Honduras.

We get to the home of Don Mario, our last patient, well after dusk. At the village, I ask if they are any family members of Don Mario that I can speak with and his daughter responds, “Why don’t you speak with him?” I am amazed that my patient could still be alive! The joy that one feels at finding survivors of cancer is unexplainable. I don’t understand how in the hospital I never felt this joy but now, three months into this search, I am satisfied to find a patient and to sit down to speak about their illness and life after it.

A man of roughly 1.7 meters approaches and with a smile warmly asks what I’ve been up to and where I have been. I am impressed that Don Mario at almost 70 years had been diagnosed with cancer 13 years ago and was still in good health. I had expected a man with characteristic signs of chronic illness; instead, to my great surprise, Don Mario is in perfect health. He explains that he had been treated in the United States and how his employer, the owner of many banks in Honduras, had paid for his surgery and chemotherapy as well. He tells me that this life-saving treatment has permitted him to watch his daughters grow up and into burgeoning professionals, as they have all finished middle school. Of his cancer, only a scar on his abdomen remains.

The day ends with great satisfaction and emotion, in great part thanks to Don Mario. He is part of the 3% of survivors of those patients diagnosed with gastric cancer in the last 10-15 years at the Honduras’s third largest hospital, Hospital de Occidente.

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