

# PROJECT HELPING HANDS UNITES WITH BOLIVIAN LEADERS

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In early July of 2011, Project Helping Hands sent a volunteer team of nurses and physicians to Bolivia for a 7-day educational trip. The purpose of this trip was twofold: (1) to provide seminars for Bolivian physicians, nurses, and first responders and (2) to gather information to help develop a 5-year educational program based on the reported needs of health care providers. The educational team was led by Pat Clutter, MEd, RN, and included Dr. Tan Pinney, Dr. Chuck Sheppard, Norma Heuer, RN, and me (Cindy Trynieszewski, MSN, RN).

## About Project Helping Hands

Project Helping Hands ([www.projecthelpinghands.org](http://www.projecthelpinghands.org)), which is a not-for-profit humanitarian medical mission organization, was established in 1994 by Jeff Solheim, MSN, RN. This organization has sponsored more than 50 humanitarian medical teams to various countries around the world, including the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Bolivia, Honduras, the Sudan, Liberia, Uganda, Nigeria, and Kenya. The mission of Project Helping Hands is to provide health intervention services for those lacking access to health care, develop sustainable, locally run health promotion and prevention programs, and facilitate safe and affordable personal growth opportunities for its volunteers in third-world countries. Beyond treating illness and disease, the teams help build medical services in remote areas with the goal of seeing them become self-sufficient.

## Why Bolivia?

For several years, Project Helping Hands has sent volunteer medical teams to Bolivia to conduct medical clinics and

educational seminars. Bolivia, with a population of 10 million people, is one of the poorest and least developed countries in Latin America despite its rich natural resources of natural gas, iron, and lithium. The difficult economic situation has been attributed to high levels of corruption and the role played by foreign powers in the country since its colonization.

The following list of key facts about Bolivia speaks to the medical and other needs of the people:

- Sixty percent of the country's population lives in poverty, and 37.7% live in extreme poverty.<sup>1</sup>
- The rate of rural poverty is 77.3%.<sup>2</sup>
- The infant mortality rate is among the highest in South America. Of every 1000 live births, 50 infants die within the first year.<sup>1</sup>
- The rate of chronic malnutrition is the highest in Latin America (measured as a percentage of children younger than 5 years who have stunted growth).<sup>3</sup>
- Life expectancy is 65.7 years and is below the region's average.<sup>1</sup>
- The country has one physician for every 833 inhabitants.<sup>4</sup>
- Although the country has a comprehensive social insurance plan, it covers less than half the working population.<sup>5</sup>
- Diseases such as malaria, dysentery, and tuberculosis are very common.<sup>6</sup>

## The Team Springs Into Action

With the assistance of dedicated in-country hosts (Felipe Kittelson and Humberto Flores) and volunteer translators, the team spent several days conducting seminars in La Paz and Cochabamba. Before embarking on the trip, Pat Clutter worked closely with the Bolivian hosts and key physicians to identify seminar topics that had relevance to the intended audience. Suggested topics included disaster management and emergency and trauma care. Once the topics were confirmed, Pat secured experts in these content areas (Table 1).

Although the seminar topics were planned in advance of the trip, with short notice, the La Paz Chapter of the Bolivia College of Physicians asked the team to conduct a prehospital workshop. Without hesitation and with the support of local physicians and prehospital personnel, the

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TABLE 1  
Sharing Best Practices

Initial Trauma Assessment	Tan Pinney, MD
Ketamine in Trauma	Chuck Sheppard, MD, FACEP
Burns and Cold Injuries	Tan Pinney, MD
Non-invasive Ventilation	Chuck Sheppard, MD, FACEP
Disaster Management	Norma Heuer, RN, BA, CEN
Triage in Disaster	Norma Heuer, RN, BA, CEN

Educational seminars were conducted in La Paz and Cochabamba, Bolivia, for medical students, nurses, first responders (primarily police and fire fighters), and physicians. The following topics were presented by the Project Helping Hands team members:

team quickly orchestrated a hands-on workshop that included the following 3 stations:

- Station 1: Pediatric Trauma Assessment and Management, conducted by Dr. Sheppard
- Station 2: Initial Adult Trauma Assessment, conducted by Pat Clutter
- Station 3: Disaster Triage, conducted by Norma Heuer

Equipment, although limited and dated, was provided by surrounding fire companies and the medical college. Translators were quickly commissioned, and one of the translators volunteered her children to role play as patients in the pediatric trauma station. The workshop was a resounding success, and participants walked away with information they could apply in their practice immediately, such as how to stabilize a suspected pelvic fracture with use of a blanket or towel (Figures 1 and 2).

### Looking to the Future

In addition to conducting educational seminars, the team participated in several strategic meetings to identify educational and training needs for future trips. In both La Paz and Cochabamba, the team met with first responders at local fire departments to discuss equipment needs and educational priorities. Overall, basic emergency care equipment and supplies were scarce, and most existing resources were in a state of disrepair. Of greater concern is the fact that both Cochabamba and La Paz need a formal paramedic program. The team learned that first responders, who receive 1 week of basic training, are not certified. The first responders in both cities embraced the opportunity to attend the educational seminars conducted by the team, and their enthusiasm was further indicated when, the next day, they provided the team with a list of topics for future seminars.

In Cochabamba, the team met with Dr. Christian Sanchez, emergency physician at the Hospital of Hope, and Dr. Sandro Zambrana, hospital director and staff gynecologist at Tiquipaya Hospital, to discuss immediate and long-term educational needs. Dr. Sanchez explained that Bolivia does not offer specific emergency medicine education or training and that he and his wife Paula were very interested in helping to coordinate future seminars. To the team's amazement, Dr. Sanchez and his wife immediately began exploring topics for the future and searching to find central locations to conduct the seminars, and they are investigating the possibility of offering credits for accreditation and certification from the College of Physicians in Cochabamba.

Aside from the lack of basic emergency care education, Dr. Zambrana expressed a great concern about Bolivia's lack of formalized disaster planning and training. He explained that the response to disasters in the recent past was disorganized and chaotic, in large part because of a lack of cooperation among local municipalities, which they are successfully working to correct. Dr. Zambrana agreed to share existing documentation related to disaster management, which will serve as a reference point for the team's future disaster response and management educational efforts. Dr. Zambrana requested seminars for physicians, nurses, and first responders on emergency care and disaster training, as well as conducting a mock disaster.

In La Paz, the team was invited to meet with key health care providers and administrators. At the Health Sciences Department at the State University of La Paz, Universidad Mayor de San Andres, the team met with administrators, and through a panel discussion, learned of their strong desire to establish a disaster training program and offer emergency care seminars to physicians and nurses. More importantly, they explained that the University greatly needs a formal paramedic program, which would be essential to providing consistent, safe care and would allow these providers to enjoy an increase in stature and pay. After returning from the trip, Dr. Sheppard shared a paramedic curriculum program along with relevant protocols and policies to assist in future efforts.

Dr. Luis Larrea, President of the College of Physicians, met the team with enthusiasm and was instrumental in ensuring the success of the seminars and workshop. With his prompting, the last seminar held in La Paz had the greatest overall attendance, and the hands-on workshop was well attended by members of the military, police, and other first responders. (Dr. Larrea is pictured in Figure 3 with the Project Helping Hands team members.)

Beatrice Martinez Murillo, the President of the College of Nursing, spoke at length with the team's nurses,

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